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ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE

A WOMAN'S PASSAGE:
NEGOTIATING AN EXTRAORDINARY TRANSITION IN MID-LIFE

by

Elizabeth Helena Short

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of St. Stephen's College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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I dedicate this thesis to

Avery

May you never lose your beautiful voice.

ABSTRACT

When a major life change occurs, we can find ourselves in uncharted territory or transitions. Old assumptions no longer hold true, but our new reality has yet to be discovered. This study looks at difficult transitions for women in mid-life. This, potentially, is a time in a woman's life where many *predictable* changes are already calling into question, "who am I?" This work examines how women have coped with a difficult and *unpredicted* change.

The qualitative research method of narrative inquiry was used. Four women, who had experienced different challenging mid-life transitions, joined me as co-researchers. They took part in three group discussions and one individual interview. These women were chosen because they had successfully negotiated their transition and had the ability to be articulate and thoughtful about their experience.

The research drew from literature pertaining to both transition and women in mid-life. As well I drew upon my own experience of a challenging mid-life transition. Within the study it was necessary to define transition, and this was derived from the works of William Bridges. The purpose was to move from a definition to look at ways women have been successful in negotiating the experience of transition, looking at resources drawn upon, external and internal.

Weaving its way throughout the work was the theological thread. I have shared my personal theology which is transitional in nature and examined how faith had played a role in the co-researchers' transitions and how their transitions had affected their faith.

The goal of the study is to learn ways in which to encourage others going through difficult life transitions.

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INTRODUCTION: PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

*Deep
is where it is dark
where there is mystery
where the way is not known
where it is easy to become fearful
and even turn back.*

*but
Deep
within your heart,
God,
is where
there's always strength to go in
where truth becomes known
where your love holds me close
where I need not be afraid.*

*my hidden self,
Deep, Deep down
in the womb of Yourself:
safe
nourished
guarded
enlivened.*

*Take me there, God.
I want to go.*

Joyce Rupp¹

Throughout our lifespan we experience life changing events. These events will trigger a process of transition and if we can let go of an old way of being we will adapt to a new reality. William Bridges has studied, taught and written extensively on this subject. For purposes of clarifying the term “transition,” I will use his definition: “*Transition* is not just a nice way to say *change*, it is the inner process through which people come to terms with a change, as they let go of the way things used to be and

¹ Joyce Rupp, *Dear Heart, Come Home: The Path of Midlife Spirituality* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 23.

reorient themselves to the way that things are now.”² Bridges adamantly distinguishes between *change* and *transition*:

The relation between change and transition is further complicated by the fact that some people actually utilize external changes to distract them from the harder business of letting go of their subjective realities and identities. They make changes *so they won't have to make transitions*. They walk out on their marriages, but take along the attitudes toward partners that destroyed their marriages. Or they continue to search for “someone to take care of me” after they quit their jobs because their bosses are not interested in playing that role. Or they move because their town doesn't have any ‘interesting people’ in it—only to find that their new town doesn't either. Such people may claim that they are ‘always in transition,’ but in fact they are probably never in transition. They are addicted to change, and like any addiction, it is an escape from the real issues raised by their lives.³

Various people have used various terms to describe the time of transition. Bridges calls it the “neutral zone.”⁴ Elizabeth Harper Neeld talks about a *threshold*: “being on a threshold that marks the passage from how things *were* to how things are *going to be*”⁵ and further uses the word “terrain”⁶ to describe the *place* of transition.

As women approach and begin to journey through mid-life, there can be several predictable and challenging transitions. These in and of themselves can be complicated and not easily negotiated. A changing body can be an encompassing part of this life journey. Kathleen J. Greider defines this transitional time in a way that is comprehensive and succinct:

² William Bridges, “Transition as the Way Through,” *Organization in Transition*, 14, no.3. http://wmbridges.com/articles/article-way_through.html (accessed January 19, 2011).

³ William Bridges, *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ Elizabeth Harper Neeld, *Tough Transitions: Navigating Your Way Through Difficult Times* (New York: Warner Books, 2005), 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Long glossed over by scholars, midlife is coming to be understood as a period of complex development. Indeed, some developmentalists now argue that, more than any other period, midlife carries with it an unsurpassed range and depth of personal and relational responsibilities, quandaries, and challenges. To name a few, midlife is typically a time of intensive caring for children, elderly parents, and other people reliant on the midlife adult; reassessment of one's primary relationships and commitments; mounting responsibilities or declining opportunities in the workplace; expectations for participation in community life; increased awareness of unrealized or disappointing life goals; and, almost always, increased confrontation with human mortality. Each woman navigates these enormous relational and psychospiritual challenges of midlife—often overwhelming in themselves—in a body that is changing profoundly, with or without her awareness.⁷

In defining mid-life, Greider makes the point that the perimenopause stage of life can last up to 15 years and is a time of change and discovery.⁸ Bridges would call this a *developmental* transition.⁹ Greider's comments resonate with my personal experience. Further complicating the meandering and lengthy journey of perimenopause I experienced an acrimonious divorce. I had been married for nearly 26 years and had four children, one at university and three in grades six to twelve, all of whom were angry and upset. The divorce necessitated moving to a new home, finding a new parish, and changing jobs. As well, I was compromised financially. Throughout this time, however, I was supported by good friends and a loving family. The respect for the privacy of my children and ex-husband prevent me from giving in depth details, but this event fueled my passion for the subject of transition. This personal experience is what led me to explore how others have coped with an unexpected and devastating life event during this

⁷ Kathleen J. Greider, "Perimenopause and Other Midlife Opportunities." *In Her Own Time: Women and Developmental Issues in Pastoral Care*, edited by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, 193. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁹ William Bridges, *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*, 4.

time of profound change or, in Bridges' language, a *reactive* transition.¹⁰ "This incident and the process that transpired from it have led me to a deep interest in personal transition generally. I am interested in hearing other people's stories of transition and I am interested in searching for common themes weaving through these stories."¹¹

The story of the human spirit is an interesting one for me. I have a background in education and have spent more than twenty-five years in ministry. Combining these experiences with the relationships I have had with friends, I have seen and heard numerous stories of people's lives. I have, at times, been a distant observer and at other times been more closely involved. What I have experienced is that when people encounter difficult times in their lives they have a variety of ways of responding.

I came to this thesis with the general desire to learn more about the experience of transition, determining what has been helpful and not helpful for people. An aspect of this was to determine how and why some people seem to be more successful than others at negotiating a transition, and to look at their resiliency. My definition of success—how it is defined, and by whom—prior to the research has remained the same post research. Successfully negotiating a difficult transition would mean that the person could recognize that whatever has happened is part of who she is, but it does not define her. These perspectives and curiosities have led me to my question: *What resources have middle aged women drawn upon to negotiate a difficult transition?*

My co-researchers were four articulate, grace-filled women, each having experienced a different transition during midlife. I chose women who I regarded as

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ Elizabeth Short, "Story and Truth: Exploring the Use of Narrative Inquiry," Unpublished Essay, 2013, 2.

mature and emotionally and mentally healthy. This was evidenced to me in the way they lived their lives and interacted with others. They generously and openly shared their wisdom. Some were through their transitions, some near the end. What became apparent is that there were instances when the pivotal time of midlife informed the critical event occurring in positive ways. In other words, the *ordinary* upheavals we as mid-life women are experiencing can begin to inform our *extraordinary* experience in a way that is beneficial. It gives me joy to think that the shared wisdom of these incredible women can eventually be an encouragement for others.

In our research together, certain words came forward and have now formed the framework for this thesis. These words were *light, voice, mask, purpose* and *hope*. Words that will also be examined are *resiliency, transformation, control, and surrender*. These words continued to come up in our three sessions and all the co-researchers agreed that they named important factors in their individual transitions.

It was important for me to know how faith had played a role in each woman's journey. After some consideration, I decided that the women I would invite to be co-researchers would come from a background of Christian faith. Although it was not necessary that all be from an Anglican background, they were. All had been "raised in the church". I did this for purposes of specificity and to provide a starting point. The faith thread wove its way throughout the conversation. Although their personal experiences of the journey of faith differed, there was genuine respect for each woman's perspective. It turns out that for all of them faith was indeed important and although their ways of exploring and living it varied, it was a constant. For some their faith, when questioned, remained intact and similar, although more profound. For others it has been reshaped, and

for one the question of faith has led her into a whole new journey of exploration. In fact, she feels that in terms of her faith, she is now in transition.

The qualitative methodology used was narrative inquiry. It was powerful to listen to each woman's story and truth about her experience of transition. Although my own personal narrative informed the research, by listening to these women share, affirm, clarify and respond I gained valuable insights.

I have defined the time of transition as a *passage*. In reading William Bridges' writings about transition, my short interpretation or definition would be that transition begins with an ending and ends with a beginning¹². What this thesis is examining is the journey between. Joyce Rupp spent thirty-seven days walking the Camino De Santiago in Spain. She has written a book that shares her reflections of this Pilgrimage. As she found her stride she wrote, "The journey was walking me as I was walking it. I knew I would never be the same again."¹³ That, to me, is what a transition is about and is indeed what this thesis process is about.

¹² William Bridges, *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*, 118.

¹³ Joyce Rupp, *Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 41.

LITERATURE REVIEW: MAPPING THE JOURNEY

*Remember you have come here with wonder, to learn, explore, and discover.
Like Christopher Columbus, you may begin the process expecting to discover India,
but instead you will discover the New World.*

Remain open to the unknown.

-Nancy K. Farber¹⁴

The question for my thesis has been approached and discussed thematically.

There were several strands that wove their way throughout. A methodology was required to provide the parameters of research. The narrative inquiry approach implied an understanding and respect for story and the power it contains. If the methodology provided the parameters, then an exploration of the phenomenon of transition provided the framework. As well it was necessary to offer a definition concerning women in mid-life in order to shed light on who this research was about and provide insight into the issues raised. Throughout all this was the theological perspective.

Methodology: Respecting Personhood

In this section I review literature that was informative in the constructing of my thesis. Literature is also referred to in the chapter on Methodology as it pertained to the ongoing implementation and execution of the research.

Qualitative Research

In studying methodology the broad concept of qualitative research appealed to me. Particularly I appreciated its holistic approach. Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman's useful text, *Designing Qualitative Research* expresses well the appeal of qualitative research:

¹⁴ Nancy K. Farber, "Conducting Qualitative Research: A practical Guide for School Counselors," *American School Counselor Association* 9, no 2 (2006): 10.

Many qualitative researchers, despite their various methodological stances, tend to espouse some common values and enact a family of procedures for the conduct of a study. They are intrigued by the complexity of social interactions expressed in daily life and by the meanings that the participants themselves attribute to these interactions. They are also exquisitely aware that they work in and through interpretations—their own and others’-layered in complex hermeneutic circles. These interests take qualitative researchers into natural settings rather than laboratories, and foster pragmatism in using multiple methods...¹⁵

Nancy K. Farber has written a succinct article for the American School Counselor Association entitled “Conducting Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for School Counselors.” She states that it is unlike quantitative research where there are “forced-choice questions in which we are expecting answers to fit into certain categories.”¹⁶ I like the sense that rather than proving a hypothesis or theory, the researcher is exploring the question in an open-ended manner: “While we may have some hypothesis about what we will find, the qualitative approaches are used more when we really do not know just what we will find but rather are interested in listening, exploring, and discovering meaning in situations. We use open-ended questions in order to keep an open mind.”¹⁷

There is practical advice in this article, including dealing with the ethics of research, data collection, and data analysis. As an example, a point well taken was about data analysis. “If you are like most qualitative researchers, you probably already will feel that you intuitively have many answers to your questions. You are likely to feel transformed by your experiences. Your task now, however, is to take a step back from your data and analyze it as objectively as possible.”¹⁸ This proved to be very true. The

¹⁵ Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2011), 2.

¹⁶ Nancy K. Farber, “Conducting Qualitative Research: A practical Guide for School Counselors,” 7.

¹⁷ Ibid. 7.

research experience itself was enlightening and exciting, but in taking a step back and going over the data collected, I was more informed by the experience. There is more about this in the methodology section.

Ellie Fossey, Carol Harvey, Fiona McDermott, and Larry Davidson's article, "Understanding and Evaluating Qualitative Research" provides a good introduction to qualitative research as it examines it as "a broad umbrella term for research methodologies that describe and explain persons' experiences, behaviors, interactions and social contexts without the use of statistical procedures or quantification."¹⁹

Narrative Inquiry

The more I have read about it, the more Narrative Inquiry resonates with me. "The method assumes that people construct their realities through narrating their stories. The researcher explores a story told by a participant and records that story."²⁰ I am a proponent of the power of story and believe that a person's story is her truth. Reading about this research method was exciting and inviting.

Leonard Webster and Patricie Mertova have written a book dedicated to the subject of narrative inquiry. As stated in the preface, it was published in 2007, with the desire to "outline one research approach using stories of human experience in teaching and learning research."²¹ The intention of this book was that it would "comprehensively

¹⁸ Ibid, 17.

¹⁹ Ellie Fossey, Carol Harvey, Fiona McDermott, and Larry Davidson, "Understanding and Evaluating Qualitative Research," *Australian and New Zealand Journal Psychiatry*, 36, (2002): 717.

²⁰ Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2011), 153.

²¹ Leonard Webster and Patricie Mertova, *Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 9.

explain how researchers should use narrative as a research method.”²² The literature I found tended to be specific to one discipline, such as nursing or education, and one aspect of narrative inquiry, so I appreciated the comprehensiveness of this book.

Nicola Slee wrote a book about a major research project she conducted entitled, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*. This book addressed various themes relevant to my research, including qualitative research, particularly as it pertains to women, women in mid-life, and women and faith. She speaks of the value of story:

Story, like metaphor, is one of the most basic linguistic means of meaning-making available to humanity, and seems to represent a fundamental human need, as well as proclivity. Like metaphor, story gives shape, significance and intentionality to experience, but unlike metaphor, its linear unfolding over time implies a historical perspective on experience which is capable of capturing the dynamic movement and flow of human experience. Where any single metaphor is limited in the range of its reference, story can encompass the totality of experience, weaving together the many disparate images and metaphors which capture different aspects of experience into a patterned whole.²³

Three articles from which I gained a wealth of information were “Thesis as Narrative or “What is the Inquiry in Narrative Inquiry?” by Carola Conle, “Thesis as Inquiry” by Petra Munro Hendry, and “Narrative Inquiry: Theory and Practice” by Maggi Savin-Bladen and Lana Van Nierkerk.

Conle’s paper is based on a personal narrative, about her use of narrative inquiry for her doctoral thesis. In other words, she is *doing it* as she is *writing about* it. She gives a solid defense of narrative inquiry while at the same time pointing out potential pitfalls. She makes a point that, when I read it, I knew I had to take seriously and not underestimate the importance of inquiry.

²² Ibid., 9.

²³ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 67-68.

I suspect that candidates doing a narrative thesis are so taken up by the process, enjoying the doing of it, that they are not much interested in characterizing its inquiry quality abstractly. They are more interested in what they have learned through the process. They may even view it as therapeutic. It is this reaction that fuels the doubts of critics of narrative work.²⁴

Conle goes on to say that there are “intellectual and emotional qualities inherent in narrative inquiry.”²⁵ This tension certainly existed within the subject matter of my thesis which also encouraged me to employ this methodology. Conle speaks of the inevitable tensions within narrative inquiry: “As I suggested earlier, difficulties as well as advantages arise from the interwoven nature of process and product in personal narrative. Methods of narrative inquiry, rather than being externally defined, emerge out of the inquiry activities. They are not as much means to an end as they are part of the ends achieved.”²⁶

As stated above, the idea that, with qualitative research, you do not require a formulated hypothesis was appealing to me. Conle takes this further when she speaks of the open endedness of narrative inquiry. We can have an instinct driving the research but we require openness to where the research may take us: “Like scientists following hunches, like artists trying to embody a yet undefined vision, I had been on a quest without a defined end-in-view. It is this quest that in my view makes the enterprise educational. It is this quest that gives a research quality to narrative inquiry. It is what drives the data generation.”²⁷

²⁴ Carola Conle, “Thesis as Narrative or ‘What is the Inquiry in Narrative Inquiry?’” *Curriculum Inquiry* 30, no 2 (2000): 190.

²⁵ Ibid. 191.

²⁶ Ibid., 201.

²⁷ Ibid., 198.

I appreciate the holistic light in which Petra Munro Hendry casts narrative inquiry. She addresses three forms of this methodology. These forms are interrelated and each begins with a question, or doubt:

The heart of inquiry is ambiguity, the necessity of being open to other traditions, to questioning. The threat to science, to inquiry, and, ultimately to education is to elevate one and only one way of knowing the world. It is here that narrative can, I believe, help scholars rethink inquiry in ways that are more ethical and democratic by enlarging the conversation regarding multiple research traditions. I propose that narrative as an epistemology of doubt can address questions in regard to three major domains: the physical (science), human experience (symbolic), and the metaphysical (sacred). These three narratives all engage in the asking of questions but require unique approaches to the doubt they stimulate.²⁸

Going into the research I could see it falling under two of the domains Munro Hendry discusses. The primary would be *symbolic*: “*Symbolic* narratives are those that seek to respond to questions of human experience... Symbols do not represent lived experience, but rather they interpret experience... In other words, there is no correspondence between reality and the symbol. A story can be true to life without being true of life.”²⁹ Because of the theological nature of my thesis there will also be aspects of *sacred* in my inquiry – “The sacred addresses those questions that are beyond reason. It is the realm of the unknowable. Inquiry in this realm is not directed toward representing the world, but rather toward understanding matters of existence and larger questions of meaning.”³⁰

Savin-Haden and Lana Van Niekerk offer advice to narrative researchers that, for me, is advice well taken:

²⁸ Petra Munro Hendry, “Narrative as Inquiry, *The Journal of Educational Research* 103 (2010): 74.

²⁹ Ibid. 76.

³⁰ Ibid. 75.

Some important points to consider when undertaking narrative inquiry are that the researcher should:

- listen to participants' stories;
- acknowledge the mutual construction of the research relationship (both researcher and participant have a voice with which to tell their stories);
- acknowledge that people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect on life and explain themselves to others.³¹

They go on to say that “The role of the researcher is to be an effective listener and to see the interviewee as a storyteller rather than as a respondent. Therefore in interviews the agenda is open to development and change—depending on the story being told.”³²

This was helpful advice to heed and it propelled me towards being a better listener/interviewer and therefore a more effective researcher.

In giving consideration to reflexivity I was originally concerned about the inclusion of my personal narrative in the research. A book that was key in assisting me with this was by Robert J. Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*. He purports that personal narrative has its proper place in academic writing. He has developed a theory called Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN):

What I am advocating, however, takes qualitative research one major step further. SPN puts the *self* of the scholar front and center. The best SPN interview is the scholar's self-interrogation. The best analysis and prescription comes out of the scholar's efforts to make narrative sense of personal experience. All else is commentary—significant, to be sure, but commentary nonetheless. The ultimate intellectual responsibility of the SPN scholar is to find a way to use the personal insights gained in order to draw larger conclusions for readers; possibly even to challenge and reconstruct older political or educational narratives, if this an important goal for the researcher.³³

³¹ Maggi Savin-Haden and Lana Van Niekerk, “Narrative Inquiry: Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 31, no. 3 (September 2007):463.

³² *Ibid.*, 464.

³³ Robert J. Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2004), 18.

Whether it is a personal narrative, or the narrative of others, one can look at the aspect of truth or reality. Nash addresses this and I concur with what he says. Reading what he has to say about story and truth helped me to articulate an important issue that would relate to the research.

We do not live in reality itself. We live in stories about reality. Stories can be true or false based on a variety of criteria: aesthetic, psychological, theological, political, philosophical, scientific, personal experience and so forth. What makes a story true for all people in all times and places is not simply whether it can stand the test of scientific experiment, or whether it can make valid predictions that can be empirically tested. This story of truth, while helpful to those of a scientific bent, may not be helpful to others of different bents. Truth, in SPN fashion, is what works best for the narrator and the reader in the never-ending quest to find and construct narratives of meaning, both for self and others.³⁴

Nash continues to speak about truth throughout his book. Not only is truth grounded in a person's perception of reality, it is grounded in time. I know that how I view my transition, and how I tell the story of it differs from the story I would have told a few years ago. Is one story *more true* than another? Not necessarily and certainly in each circumstance I would have been telling the story *truthfully*. I related to what Nash offered in regard to recalling stories.

The past is never indelibly fixed in our memories.. It is always changing according to our present situations, moods, and perspectives. We remember *then* according to what we need, feel, and think *now*. We may never be able to change how we view the past. If I had written about my encounter with Theodore Brameld one week, or one year, or one decade later than when it first happened, I am certain that my narrative would have depended on who I was at the time I was writing about it.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵ Robert J. Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, 140-41.

Ethics

It is not good enough to examine or implement methodology without an ethical mindset. Having never done research of this nature before, I was very concerned with ethics regarding the research. Besides the guidelines provided by St. Stephen's College I thought it prudent to read the literature about ethics. Maria Hoskins and Jo-Anne Stoltz presented one problem in their very pertinent article, *Fear of Offending: Disclosing Researcher Discomfort When Engaging in Analysis*:

Our struggle lies in finding a balance between a respectful, collaborative alliance with participants, and drawing on our own body of academic knowledge (both intellectual and experiential) gained from working in academic and practice settings. For us, in doing this kind of research, a real tension exists between privileging the knowledge and expertise of participants over the researcher's ability to analyse and interpret.³⁶

Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman addressed the issue of ethics in a way that also informed my approach to the research:

For any inquiry project, ethical research practice is grounded in the moral principles of *respect for persons*, *beneficence*, and *justice*. *Respect for persons* captures the notion that we do not use the people who participate in our studies as a means to an end (often our own) and that we do respect their privacy, their anonymity, and their right to participate—or not—which is freely consented to. *Beneficence* addresses the central dictum, *primum non nocere* (first, do no harm)—first developed in medical fields. This means that the researcher does whatever he reasonably can to ensure that participants are not harmed by participating in the study. Finally, *justice* refers to distributive justice—that is, considerations of who benefits and who does not from the study, with special attention to the redress of past societal injustices.³⁷

I closely examined each of these principles in order to integrate them into the research upon which I was embarking. These principles are reflected in the letter of

³⁶ Maria Hoskins and Jo-Anne Stoltz, "Fear of Offending: Disclosing Researcher Discomfort When Engaging in Analysis," *Qualitative Research* 5, no. 95. (2005): 97.

³⁷ Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 47.

invitation (appendix 1) and the signed letter of informed consent (appendix 2). One of the goals of my thesis was to provide future encouragement to people in general, and women in particular, going through difficult transitions. It was important to create an atmosphere that was encouraging for the co-researchers and for this to be created it was necessary to include consideration of ethical issues such as the ones described in these principles.

I read the article “Ethics in Qualitative Research” by Angelica Orb, Laurel Eisenhauer and Dianne Wynaden. It was a brief article that succinctly identified issues regarding the uniqueness of the ethics regarding qualitative research and pointed out that “ethical research in qualitative research is an ongoing process.”³⁸

Fossey, Harvey and McDermott look specifically at the ethics in data collection:

Qualitative research aims to give privilege to the perspectives of research participants and to ‘illuminate the subjective meaning, actions and context of those being researched.’ Thus, central to the quality of qualitative research is whether participants’ perspectives have been authentically represented in the research process and interpretations made from information gathered (authentically); and whether the findings are coherent in the sense that they ‘fit’ the data social context from which they were derived. The importance of the power relations between the researcher and researched, and the need for transparency (openness and honesty) of data collection, analysis, and presentation implied here highlight the extent to which criteria for quality profoundly interact with standards for ethics in qualitative research.³⁹

One of the aspects in dealing with the ethics of narrative inquiry that Marshall and Rossman speak of is the importance of “a collaborative approach to the research... where the participant and the researcher co-construct the history or narrative.”⁴⁰ Connelly and Clandinin also refer to collaboration:

³⁸ Anglelico Orb, Laurel Eisenhauer, Dianne Wynaden “Ethics in Qualitative Research,” *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 33 no. 1 (2000): 96.

³⁹ Ellie Fossey, Carol Harvey, Fiona McDermott, and Larry Davidson, “Understanding and Evaluating Qualitative Research,” 723.

Narrative inquiry is, however, a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds. In the process of beginning to live the shared story of narrative inquiry, the researcher needs to be aware of constructing a relationship in which both voices are heard.⁴¹

They go on to speak of “a relationship in which both practitioners and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories.”⁴²

Women in Mid-Life

My own mid-life experience will, of course, inform the research. As Julie S. Dare states, “I am very much a *participant/observer* within the ‘culture’ I studied.”⁴³ That did not preclude an examination of the literature.

One of the things that attracted me to Dare’s article, *Transitions in Midlife Women’s Lives: Contemporary Experiences*, was that it was very recent (2011). Her research dealt with some of the “typical” issues facing women and mid-life. One of her findings, which I came to see as valid, was that although menopause and children leaving home are touted as being very difficult, most of the women moved through these with a minimum of distress. Redefining relational matters was of importance. Dare alluded to the importance of investigating the effects of more difficult transitions and I saw this as affirmation that I was on the right track.

During the discussions with the co-researchers it became apparent that I needed to further investigate the literature regarding women in mid-life. There were several articles

⁴⁰ Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 154

⁴¹ F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry.” *Educational Researcher* <http://er.aera.net>. (accessed September 27, 2010, 4.

⁴² Ibid., 4.

⁴³ Julie S. Dare, “Transitions in Midlife Women’s Lives: Contemporary Experiences.” *Health Care for Women International* 32 (2011): 116.

and books I referred to in some detail while transcribing the research: *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* by Nicola Slee; two chapters from *In Her Own Time*, edited by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner—*Perimenopause and Other Midlife Opportunities* by Kathleen J. Greider and *Betwixt and Between Again: Menopause and Identity* by Irene Henderson; “*Implications of Personal Values in Women's Midlife Development*” by Lynn Calhoun Howell; and “*A Voice of Their Own: Women Moving Into Their Fifties*,” by Elizabeth Arnold.

This was important reading because it confirmed what I was gleaning from the research, which was that the effects of a difficult and extraordinary transition in mid-life can be informed in a positive way by this developmental stage rather than being exacerbated.

Transition

I read the works of William Bridges several years ago. I was employed in lay ministry for a parish that was going through a major transition. It had outgrown its beloved old church and met in a gymnasium for three years while waiting to move into a larger church. Those of us involved in the process were given *Getting Them Through the Wilderness: A Leader's Guide to Transition* in which Bridges uses the metaphor of Moses in the Wilderness. At that same time I was going through my own difficult divorce transition. Although this article was looking at transition from a corporate viewpoint, it made a lot of sense to me and my situation. Here began my interest in what would become the topic of my thesis.

Bridges' short article, "Transition as the Way Through" provided me with the succinct definition I used for the purposes of defining transition in my thesis. His book, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* was also helpful. However, the one that was most influential to me was the book he wrote after the death of his wife, *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*. You might say that in this book his theories moved from his head to his heart.

All the things that I had written about transition—the very things that people had said were so helpful to them—now felt strangely unreal to me. I wondered, *How could I ever have tried to pass myself off as an expert on transitions?* I felt now that my words had totally failed to match in depth the *experience* of actually being in transition.

...Gradually I decided that whenever an old reality disappears, the answer is not to refuse to do anything that had been associated with it, but rather to explore and discover what the new reality is. What did my own huge encounter with transition tell me? What would I say now if I were to speak about the subject for the first time?⁴⁴

This book is Bridges' personal narrative of transition and through the telling of his story he gives definition, shape and form to the phenomenon. Anything else I read about transition was measured up against Bridges' works.

The other influential book I read was by Elizabeth Harper Neeld, *Tough Transitions: Navigating Your Way Through Difficult Times*. I appreciated the female perspective she lends to the topic. Although she uses different semantics in defining transition Bridges' and her core messages align.

Harper Neeld includes many people's real life experiences as well as drawing on her own. She examines practices and attitudes that can assist in negotiating the transition. In my thesis I wanted to examine what resources women had drawn on in order to successfully negotiate transition, so her work was certainly timely. To define success, I

⁴⁴ William Bridges, *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*, xii-xiii.

stated that it was the ability to integrate an experience as being part of who you are, without it defining you. Her following definition of transition paralleled my understanding of it:

We all start the transition in a place of uncertainty; newness, vulnerability, and potential strain. We all must, at some point, take stock of what our options are, what we can and can't do in a particular situation, what will help us move forward and what will suck us down into the quicksand of apathy. We all take steps into new places as part of navigating a tough transition, practice, fall back, practice again new ways of thinking and new models of living. We all have the opportunity to create a life that includes in an honest way the implications of the tough transition without our being defined by or identified by that tough transition. ... We can all be not just survivors but, in spite of the hard times, thrivers.⁴⁵

Unlike Bridges, Harper Neeld began her work and research about transition from a personal place, rather than corporate. Although she shares aspects of her personal journey, she tells the stories of many people's varied experiences of transition and this contributes to a very broad view. This was a valuable contrast to Bridges' more succinct and personal exploration. Both approaches were helpful in their own right.

Sue Monk Kidd wrote a novel that told of a woman's mid-life transition. *The Mermaid Chair* eloquently tells the story of transition in the form of fiction. Her novel, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* could be discussed under several of these headings as it is a book about a woman in mid-life who is going through a major transition in her personal theology.

Nearing forty, I needed to rethink my life as a man-made woman. To take back my soul. Gradually I began to see what I hadn't seen before, to feel things that until then had never dared to enter my heart. I became aware that as a woman I'd been on my knees my whole life and not really known it. Most of all, I ached for

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Harper Neeld, *Tough Transitions: Navigating Your Way Through Difficult Times*, 11.

the woman in me who had not yet been born, though I couldn't have told you then the reason for the ache.⁴⁶

Theology

Scripture is rich with stories of transition. In the section on transition, I noted that Bridges uses the metaphor of Moses in the wilderness to give meaning to the concept. There are other stories that also hold an essential truth of the transitory nature of humankind. The story of Abraham and his journey to parts unknown, and even the story of Jonah are stories of transition. There are also books of prophesy like Isaiah and Jeremiah that I would describe as words from God to people who were living in a chaotic, uncharted time during the Babylonian exile. In these books we hear of God's presence and faithfulness and in turn, the people's response to God.

Jesus had his wilderness story and the new reality that came out of this transitional experience was that he became a leader and teacher. His death and resurrection ended his ministry and this change created a transition that, in some ways, we now live. Although not quoted extensively in this thesis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has had a major influence on my personal theology. Bonhoeffer was a theologian, pastor, teacher and prolific writer who was imprisoned in Germany during the Second World War for being part of the resistance movement. Very near the end of the war he and some other prisoners were being transported and had been temporarily housed in a school room in Schönberg. A guard came and asked him to come with them. They all knew this was his

⁴⁶ Sue Monk Kidd *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey From Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1996), 11.

call to death. His parting words were, “This is the end. For me the beginning of life.”⁴⁷ His life on earth was the transition between birth and death. His ending was a beginning.

The published works of Joyce Rupp have long appealed to me. Her book, *Dear Heart, Come Home: The Path of Midlife Spirituality* had a lot of meaning for me. Not only does Rupp deal with the issue from a cross-gender point of view, but, because she uses personal experience, there is a female perspective. *Praying Our Goodbyes* touches on transitions in a meditative and creative way. *Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino* compares an actual pilgrimage to our life as pilgrims. This appeals to my theological sense in that we are all pilgrims on this earth, walking towards God, and that our whole life is a transition.

Nicola Slee’s book *Women’s Faith Development: Patterns and Process* revealed the results of her research and provided insight into a feminine viewpoint of faith. The two chapters previously mentioned from *In Her Own Time*, edited by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner provided insights as they also examined faith from an age and gender specific point of view.

In her book, Harper Neeld refers to the impact difficult transitions have on faith. The direct correlation between faith and transitions was interesting and informative. She talks about the “big questions” a transition can raise and the journey that results. She speaks of a re-ordered faith and understanding, a process of making sense of the transition in the context of faith.

For many, a tough transition marks the end of an innocent or trusting stance toward faith and values. The difficult event raises questions, destroys confidence, and throws off keel any constancy we might have known in the past. What occurs next can be a long gap of not knowing, of anger and resentment that what we had

⁴⁷ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 528.

believed and counted on did not seem to hold. These reactions, however, come to be replaced with a genuine grappling with lost certainties and a genuine groping for new insights and understandings⁴⁸.

Neeld's insight into faith made sense in the light of my own experience during my difficult transition. It also made the point that the women I would be interviewing could very likely have experienced something similar, or might still be working it out.

Faith is deeply personal and important. Reading these various narrations and explanations of faith affirmed my faith but, more importantly, allowed me to step outside my own story and be ready to listen respectfully to other people's sacred story. Neeld relates a conversation she had with a neighbor who lost a teenage son in a car accident. I end this section with a quote from this mid-life woman who was thrown into a terribly challenging transition. In this passage she refers to her faith in light of the situation:

"I realized," my friend told me, "that the principles I held before had been made out of smoke. I had to now find new principles—or rather the Principle under all principles, since the other ones were an illusion."

I ventured to ask, "What is that Principle that you have found?"

"That there is only one Truth. As trite as it may sound, Love is all there is." We sat in a sacred pause for several seconds. Then my friend added, "I'm no longer going for getting better and better. My goal is to live close to the fulcrum, in balance with the positive and negative, with hurt and joy. At this fulcrum much energy is there, peace and transcendence. And while I cannot always stay at the center, I do manage most of the time to live in the shade of it."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Harper Neeld, *Tough Transitions: Navigating Your Way Through Difficult Times*, 184.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 117-18.

METHODOLOGY – THE JOURNEY

*The world has enough dogma.
It's stories we need more of, stories that reverence the still small voice
that sings our life.
...All personal theology should begin with the phrase,
Let me tell you a story.
-Sue Monk Kidd⁵⁰*

Traveling Companions

It was a pleasure and privilege to journey with four co-researchers. Their pseudonyms were Clara, Joy, Sophia and Grace. They came with open hearts and enthusiasm, ready to share their stories. Their participation was enlightening and affirming and I will always be grateful. For a long time I have believed that when you put a group of women such as these together it can be a powerful experience, generating a loving, positive energy. I was not disappointed.

I invited six women to participate. In the end, four participated. These were women that I either knew or had known. In examining the literature, such as Farber, I read about narrative studies in which teachers employ narrative inquiry with pupils and parents that they may know at varying levels. I also took the precedent from Slee who knew one third of the thirty women she had interviewed.⁵¹ I say more about this in the ethics section. Each had gone through, or was going through, a difficult transition. From my observation, they all were successful in moving ahead with their lives, having positive attitudes and hope for the future. Because I knew these women, it was very important for me to be concerned about potential ethical issues. I knew from reading the

⁵⁰ Sue Monk Kidd, *Firstlight: The Early Inspirational Writings of Sue Monk Kidd* (New York: Guide Post Books, 2006), 34-35.

⁵¹ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*, 53.

literature regarding narrative inquiry that I must not go into the process with preconceived ideas about each individual but rather with the curiosity and open-mindedness that has made qualitative research appealing to me in the first place. This would include fully participating in the collaborative nature of the interviews.

The most challenging part of the data collection was actually finding times that everyone was available. Although I began the process in the late summer with the hope of conducting the research in the fall, we were not able to meet until after Christmas. At this point they were obliging enough to clear their schedules in order to allow us to proceed forward. The up side of this situation was that it allowed me more time to delve into the literature regarding the topic of transition and the methodology.

In order to add diversity, I invited women who had gone through different kinds of transitions in midlife. Joy was let go from a position she had held for nine years with a prestigious company. Sophia watched her husband die of a brain tumor and then adjusted to life without him. Grace had experienced several difficult moves, including one internationally and had moved yet again in mid-life. Clara was a breast cancer survivor, having spent a year in treatment. At the end of this chapter, I go into more detail about each woman's story, telling it from their perspectives.

The Route: Choosing the Methodology

In choosing the methodology for this thesis there was a need for clarity as to what purpose it would serve. First of all, what it was not. It was not to further define what a transition is. Nor was it broadly based. In a desire for specificity and reflexivity I narrowed my research to women in mid-life. The literature varies somewhat in its

definition of mid-life. For the purposes of my research I have defined mid-life to be women in their forties through to their early sixties. The four co-researchers were middle class women who were Caucasian and had their roots in the Anglican Church. Their ages ranged from fifty to sixty-two. I knew each of the women through my association with them in two of the parishes I had attended. By creating an atmosphere of affinity, it encouraged the conversation in a setting that could potentially have seemed uncomfortable and artificial. These women immediately felt comfortable with each other which allowed the conversation to be deep and meaningful right from the beginning. They knew each other by varying degrees—from very well, to slightly, to not at all.

Having narrowed the field of research, I then needed to define the purpose. The purpose of the thesis was to learn what stories mid-life women tell about the transitions they have experienced, in order to determine ways in which I could encourage people going through difficult transitions. My hope for the future was to do this through continued writing, guided conversations, retreats, and the like. By narrowing the field of research and determining the purpose, I was able to articulate the question: “What resources have middle aged women drawn upon to negotiate a difficult transition?” I wanted women to tell their stories of transition in order to shed light on this question.

It made sense to integrate the literature with people’s real life stories. This led me to the methodology. Although I had my own reference point and experience in the topic of transitions, I did not go in with a developed hypothesis. Rather I wanted my question to be open ended instead of hypothetical. This is an aspect of qualitative research that I have appreciated since learning about it. In a research endeavor that involves women, the qualitative approach makes sense, or in the words of Nicola Slee, “the holism, naturalism

and empathetic approach of qualitative research are certainly consistent with feminist values.”⁵² When I invited the women to take part in the research, they were intrigued with the subject and very willing to participate. As Clara stated at the beginning, “I am excited to enter into this process”.

To further emphasize the value these women could potentially have in the actual research, I chose to regard them and refer to them as co-researchers, rather than subjects or participants.

The Compass: The Methodology

Qualitative Research

According to Farber, the goal of qualitative research is to “gain an in-depth holistic perspective of groups of people, environments, programs, events or any phenomenon one wishes to study by interacting closely with the people one is studying.”⁵³ Farber goes on to state, “Research begins with wonder. It is important that you be truly passionate and interested in what you study.”⁵⁴ These statements certainly point to the impetus behind my research. I was and am very passionate about both the subject of transition generally and in women’s lives specifically. I was eager to acquire perspectives from other women in a way that was interactive and conversational and I was excited to learn more about the topic.

⁵² Nicola Slee, *Women’s Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*, 11.

⁵³ Nancy K. Farber, “Conducting Qualitative Research: A practical Guide for School Counselors,” 5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5

Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson assert that “no fixed minimum number of participants is necessary to conduct sound qualitative research, however, sufficient depth of information needs to be gathered to fully describe the phenomena being studied.”⁵⁵ Originally I had envisioned a larger gathering, but on the advice of my supervisor decided on only four or five women. This turned out to be a good decision. The data collection was manageable and because of the small group I believe the conversation went deeper with each woman having more opportunity to speak.

My interviews were semistructured. Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson define it this way:

Semistructured interviews are used to facilitate more focused of a specific topic, using an interview guide. Interview guides usually contain a list of questions and prompts designed to guide the interview in a focused, yet flexible and conversational manner... Semistructured interviews have a further use to follow up on specific ideas or issues, which emerged from initial unstructured interviews, during subsequent data collection.⁵⁶

What I wanted was for the co-researchers to share their experiences together in a way that was conversational, and my hope was for times of enlightenment, not just for the sake of research, but for the sake of the individuals taking part. What I envisioned was that the women would respond to questions and prompts with little intervening from me. It was exciting to see this actually take place. I felt we were working together, with little structure, to get to the crux of the subject. The co-researchers did indeed do most of the talking, which freed me up to listen and observe.

⁵⁵ Ellie Fossey, Carol Harvey, Fiona McDermott, and Larry Davidson, “Understanding and Evaluating Qualitative Research,” 726.

⁵⁶Ibid., 727.

Prior to the research I had read a lot about transition and had experienced a difficult transition in my own life, yet I gained insight into this phenomenon as I listened to their conversation and later studied it. In discussing the analysis of data, Farber speaks of “organizing it into categories on the basis of themes, patterns, concepts or similar features.”⁵⁷ I believe this is what was accomplished. Although the co-researchers had each experienced different transitions it was interesting to see the themes that emerged from their conversations. There were emergent themes that I had not previously identified which provided a wealth of information about the topic. Their ability to relate to each other’s story was very consistent. Two crucial points that were illuminated for me were the ways in which mid-life informs a difficult transition in a *positive* manner, and the importance of finding a voice. These themes were not originally overtly part of my prepared questions and, in the end, led me to further research. In the organization of the data, there are sections in the thesis dedicated to them.

There was a high level of trust amongst the co-researchers, and as they related their lived experiences they did so with clarity, insightfulness and honesty. As Joy said, they all “took off their masks”. I had invited women who were well educated, articulate and self-aware. What I had experienced in my previous interactions with them and what I had observed in their interactions with others gave me confidence in their ability to be valuable co-researchers. They possessed the ability to stand back and observe their lived experience with objectivity. This degree of high function was vital to the research. Had it not been so, the research would not have been as enlightening, successful or helpful.

⁵⁷ Nancy K. Farber, “Conducting Qualitative Research: A practical Guide for School Counselors,” 12.

Narrative Inquiry

The primary methodology for this thesis was narrative inquiry. This method appealed to me because of its emphasis on learning through the life experiences of others. Webster and Mertova define narrative inquiry this way, “Narrative inquiry is set in human stories of experience. It provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories.”⁵⁸ Elizabeth McIssac Bruce speaks of the *process* of narrative inquiry,

The narrative inquiry process can help the researcher to enter a story-telling dialogue where both researcher and participants honour experience as a place of knowing and learning. Narrative inquiry places value on subjectivity, reflection, and a sharing of feelings and experiences. It emphasizes the importance of life history narratives as a forum in which one can articulate one’s experience and reflect on its meaning...⁵⁹

This form of inquiry was very fitting for the group of co-researchers who assembled. They entered into the process with the desire to learn as well as share. In respecting each other’s stories they opened up the possibility for stories of depth and meaning. They were telling their truths and these truths were held as sacred. As the women engaged in reflection upon the stories, their own included, more insight was revealed.

The first stage of the research was examining my own narrative. I did this through personal reflection, reading journal entries written at the time, referring to literature, and discussing it with trusted friends and family. It is obvious that my personal story led me to the research in the first place, and that it would inform the research. The importance of my personal narrative could not be underestimated, nor could it be undervalued. It would

⁵⁸ Leonard Webster and Patrcie Mertova, *Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method*, 13.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth McIssac Bruce, “Theological Education for Social Ministry: Proposals Based on a Narrative Inquiry,” *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 3, no 2 (2006): 115.

be honest to say that this thesis has been a way to make sense of my own experience, not just the transition, but the new reality that is my present life.

Personal narratives of transition can be powerful indeed. For me it is a necessary part of exploring and writing about the topic. In an ethical requirement of reflexivity, it is important for me to be aware of my own story and its possible effects on my research. I must not project my own experience or truth on another person's experience and truth. However, I believe my personal narrative can also add a richness and authenticity to the research.⁶⁰

I concur with Slee's statement, "A writer necessarily writes out of her own life context and writes at least partly to make sense of and shape that life experience. The life makes sense of the work, but, in a reciprocal way, the work makes sense of the life."⁶¹ This has certainly been my experience. As the co-researchers cooperated to inform me of their experiences of transition, both individually and as a group, I could see ways in which their experiences of transition made sense of the work I have been doing and vice versa. A book that was influential for me in this process was "Liberating Scholarly Research" by Robert J. Nash. He says, "To write a personal narrative is to look deeply within ourselves for the meaning that just might, when done well, resonate with other lives; maybe even inspire them in some significant ways."⁶²

My experience of divorce is now in the past and I have been able to look at it with a level of objectivity not possible when I was in the middle of the turmoil. It has been an interesting and informative process to apply my scholarly research to my personal experience and my experience to the scholarly research. Each has informed the other in a way that has been enlightening.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Short, "Story and Truth: Exploring the Use of Narrative Inquiry," 4.

⁶¹ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*, 2.

⁶² Robert J. Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, 22.

This also held true in facilitating the research. The fact that I had experienced a difficult mid-life transition did lend itself to the conversation. I believe that briefly sharing my story at the beginning of the first conversation with the co-researchers helped them open up and share their own stories, knowing that each person in the room, *including* me was about to share a journey and that it was affinity and empathy that was bringing us together.

The motivation behind sharing my story up front came from a past experience. I had been asked to share with a group of women about the topic for my thesis. As part of this process I led a guided conversation about the topic of transition. I made a conscious effort not to allow my story to influence the telling of theirs and so I shared some theory of transition as conversation starters. Later in the day I shared my own story. The feedback I received was that this disclosure was a turning point in the conversation and when I was willing to share *my* story they were far more inclined to open up with *their* stories. One of the issues was that of trust. Because I had experienced a difficult transition they were more apt to trust their stories with me because they felt that I would understand the places they were coming from. I would treat their stories with the care and respect they deserved just as I would want my story treated with care and respect. Simply, it seems more natural and intuitive to tell your story to someone who understands and to whom there can be an unspoken connection. Considering this, I was transparent about my own experience with the co-researchers. At the beginning of the first conversation I briefly stated that I was coming at the research from the personal perspective of a difficult divorce in midlife, and that I was interested to hear about their stories to add to my knowledge and experience.

The next step in the research was to allow the literature to inform the research and vice versa. Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk begin their definition of narrative inquiry by stating, “The idea of narrative inquiry is that stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature.”⁶³ I agree with this statement and would go on to suggest, as does Conle, that an understanding of the experience (research) and the literature move in and out of each other⁶⁴: “Many narrativist researchers in education continuously weave explorations of the literature into their work as the need arises to understand a particular issue from a wider perspective. This model is particularly congruent to narrative studies because it allows the exploration of the literature to be integrated into the storyline.”⁶⁵

Prior to the research with the group I had done extensive reading about transition. I had also read about forms of qualitative research and decided on a particular method, familiarized myself with that method and prepared the structure of the research. After researching with the group I went back to the literature I had read previously. Some of what I had read now had more meaning for me and I wanted to re-read for the sake of congruency. This research also led me to seek out further reading to learn more about the concepts brought forward in the conversation.

Through the reading of the literature, and through reflecting on my own experience, there were themes surrounding transition that emerged. The theme of letting go of past realities in order to make way for new ones is a constant theme for transition.

⁶³ Maggi Savin-Haden and Lana Van Niekerk, “Narrative Inquiry: Theory and Practice,” 459.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Short, “Story and Truth: Exploring the Use of Narrative Inquiry,” 6-7.

⁶⁵ Carola Conle, “Thesis as Narrative or ‘What is the Inquiry in Narrative Inquiry?’” 209..

There are themes regarding *roles* in transition. For example, the role of people (family, friends, colleagues, church community), the role of creative activities and the role of faith. There are also themes around other activities, both participated in and given up. Then there are larger subjective themes such as boundaries, courage, self-image/care, and transformation. I incorporated these themes into the questions or conversation prompts that I used for the group discussion (see appendix 3). I also drew from these themes for the set of questions I asked each co-researcher in the individual interviews. These themes are examined in the Discussion part of the thesis.

As the research continued, I heard repeated concepts and experiences and concluded that the research was pointing out themes I had yet to name. I heard these emerging themes in the co-researchers' discussions as they responded to my prompts and when asked for their own insights. This sent me back to the literature. I looked at works I had already read, and also sought out new sources to more fully explore these themes.

Through this collection of data, the following themes are discussed: women in mid-life; faith; finding a voice (with sub themes of speaking up to myself and others, masks and courage); letting go of past realities to make way for the new; the roles of people in the transition; self-care (including physical activities, creative pursuits, boundaries/choices, and emotional wellbeing); success (including looking to the future and sharing wisdom).

Story and Truth

Many of the definitions surrounding narrative inquiry use the word *story*. Webster and Mertova discuss this:

Narrative inquiry is set in human stories. It provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the

world depicted through their stories. According to Bell (2002), narrative inquiry rests on the assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures on them. We select these elements of experience to which we will attend, and we pattern those chosen elements in ways that reflect stories available to us. Narrative is not an objective reconstruction of life—it is a rendition of how life is perceived. As such, it is based on the respondent's life experiences and entails chosen parts of their lives.⁶⁶

To continue my process I needed to consider the meaning of *story*, along with the word *truth*. People believe their lived story – it is their truth and creates their reality. “A story can be true to life without being true of life.”⁶⁷ In order for my research to be pertinent it was very important that the women I chose as co-researchers should be women who had a high level of self-awareness. As previously stated, I chose educated, high functioning and articulate women whose ability for self-reflection was well developed. Having said that, I believe it is important to understand what I mean by *truth*. Nash distinguishes between *ethical* and *narrative* truth. Ethical truth is that which does not “mislead or deceive the reader.”⁶⁸ My reporting of these women's stories needed to be ethically truthful. However, in listening to their stories, I was hearing their narrative truth, and that too was valid.

Bridges makes a similar point in referencing the way in which a transition creates a new reality and, therefore, a new way of seeing our world and naming our truth. In one instance he makes the point while explaining that our way of interpreting the future can

⁶⁶ Leonard Webster and Patrcie Mertova, *Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method*, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Petra Munro Hendry, “Narrative as Inquiry,” *The Journal of Educational Research*, 74.

⁶⁸ Robert J. Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, 137.

change, “It was not just the external change but rather an inner shift of outlook and a redefinition of possibility that combined with the outer changes to create a new reality.”⁶⁹

Understanding and respecting peoples’ stories was potentially difficult territory and I went into the research with a clear sense of the need to discern the truth from several perspectives. “The interpretation of a person’s personal narrative must be done in a manner that is true to what she says, true to what is heard and lends truth to a particular issue, in this case transitions.”⁷⁰ There was the additional challenge of presenting what I gleaned from the narratives in a manner that was scholarly and congruent. At times I pulled several truths together to present a larger truth.

Like the original narrator, we simultaneously look inward toward our own experience of the performance (our interpretive shaping of it as listeners) and outward to our audience (to whom we must display a degree of scholarly competence). Presumably, the patterns upon which we base our interpretations can be shown to inhere in the ‘original’ narrative, but our aims in pointing out certain features, or in making connections between the narrative and larger cultural formations, may at times differ from the original narrator’s intentions. This is where issues of our responsibility to our living sources become most acute.⁷¹

A wonderful atmosphere of trust was created during the research and each woman felt safe to share her truth with those present. When people know that others are intentionally listening and that they will be heard and respected, it’s logical for them to be encouraged to go deeper into their stories. The collective wisdom that was generated from this experience was profound. The women felt validated and the research was far richer as a result.

⁶⁹ William Bridges, *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life’s most difficult Moments*, 128.

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Short, *Story and Truth: Exploring the Use of Narrative Inquiry*, 9.

⁷¹ Borland, Katherine, “That’s Not What I Said: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research,” *The Oral History Reader* 63, Moodle@Hampshire College website: <https://moodle.hampshire.edu/mod/resource/view.php?id=31880>, accessed January 19, 2011.

The Process

I contacted the prospective co-researchers to tell them a bit about my thesis and the upcoming research and let them know my desire to have them be part of it. When they responded positively I emailed each person a copy of the *letter of intention* (see appendix 2), outlining what my project was about and what I was asking of them. My intention was to put together a group of four to five women, so I began by inviting six. Because five responded affirmatively there was no need to seek out others. In the end, one woman was unable to attend our first gathering, so for purposes of continuity, she was not part of the process.

We met on a Saturday morning at my house. We met in a space that was private as well as comfortable and inviting. I had sent each woman the letter of informed consent (see appendix 2) to read ahead of time and we signed these letters. My intention was to carry out two sessions that day and then, if we felt there was more to discuss, set another time to gather. As it turned out, everyone agreed that it would be advantageous to meet again and they were very cooperative in clearing their schedules so that we could meet that following Tuesday evening. Each session lasted for approximately ninety minutes. Following the third session I set up times to meet with the co-researchers individually in order to give them the opportunity to share further reflections and have the opportunity to speak privately. I conducted three of these interviews in person and one over the phone. I recorded the group conversations as well as taking notes. For the individual interviews I just took notes. As there were only two of us, I felt more involved in the conversation this way and thought the co-researcher would feel more at ease. Taking notes was far less cumbersome when I didn't need to keep the various speakers sorted out.

As stated, I formed questions and conversation prompts based on themes taken from the literature and my personal experience. As the conversations carried on new themes emerged, such as how finding her voice played a vital role in each woman's transition and the positive ways in which midlife can inform a difficult transition. Based on the enthusiasm and intensity of the conversations relating to these issues, it was obvious how important they were. It was Grace who at first pointed out the positive impact that mid-life can have during a transition. The conversation went from there. If I was to learn from the co-researchers, it was imperative that I pick up on the themes and ideas that they were identifying. Feedback and clarification was also fertile ground.

The first session began with a review of issues of confidentiality and conduct around listening, affirming and not condemning. For the sake of clarification, I provided a definition/explanation of what I meant when I used the term transition. It was important that the co-researchers had this context for their conversations. After giving a brief description of my mid-life transition, I asked them to introduce themselves using their pseudonyms and explaining why they had been invited to be part of these upcoming conversations. Hearing how they chose to do this was interesting because they jumped right in and told their stories with considerable detail, which I was not expecting at this very early stage. For the second session, I used the prompts, interspersed with brief definitions of transitions for purposes of clarification. Before beginning the third session I asked for feedback from the co-researchers, giving them a chance to share any insights that had occurred to them in the few days since our last gathering. The concept of personal choice in a transition as well as the difference between internal and external processing was discussed. This conversation was a good example of where flexibility and

allowing discussion to take a different direction, than what I may have planned for was valuable. It provided an opportunity to more fully define transition and give clearer context. It also encouraged me to go back to the literature to see what it said about this subject.

Following the discussion relating to their insights regarding the first two sessions, I then shared what I saw as important words, or themes that had arisen for me during our former conversation, such as transformation, mask, light and voice. I then asked for any comments. Again, their insights were valuable.

Following the interview process my next task was to transcribe the recorded sessions and go through the notes taken throughout the process in order to explore the data. I organized the stories in relation to the various themes that had emerged. To further validate the process, I shared what I had written with the co-researchers as I went along, encouraging their feedback.

The Women's Stories

The initial descriptions of their particular transitions formed the basis of the research, and for that reason it is imperative that I relate their introductory stories. What follows is taken from the recorded conversations as well as the notes I took. In order to be true to their stories, I have paraphrased and directly quoted them extensively, both here and throughout the thesis.

Since qualitative research claims to represent participants' own perspectives, or subjective experiences of their worlds, it is important to consider the extent to which the qualitative research report reflects the perspectives of those it claims to represent. The use of quotations (i.e. participants' own words) juxtaposed with the writer's description and interpretation helps the reader to evaluate the authenticity of the researcher's claims about the data.⁷²

⁷² Ellie Fossey, Carol Harvey, Fiona McDermott, and Larry Davidson, "Understanding and Evaluating Qualitative Research," p. 730.

Clara

Clara said that she believed she had been invited because of the “cancer journey I went through and came through the other side.” She was diagnosed with cancer in the fall of 2009 and had just begun a new job in July. Things moved very quickly from the time she first saw her General Practitioner to the diagnosis of “invasive lobular breast cancer” on the fifth of October, (“These dates stick in your mind”). She had made the decision that until she had more information (a few weeks), she chose not to share this with her children or anyone other than her husband. She said that it is interesting the choices you make. She said, “I have to say, I did not lose a lot of sleep. I knew that breast cancer was highly curable and I really didn’t fall into this big hole. I just thought, ‘Okay I just have to get through’.” She had all her family over for Thanksgiving and she said, “It was there, but it was not something that was going to take me down.”

She saw the oncologist at the end of the month and he said that he could get her into surgery by the Thursday of that week. She said, “Fine, just book it.” She went into work and let them know she would be off work, not having any idea that she would be off for a full year. She somehow thought she would have surgery and “that would be that.” She went to the breast cancer supportive care group and, through counseling with the doctor there, made the decision to have a single breast mastectomy. Following the surgery, which she tolerated and healed well from, she was told she would have to have chemotherapy and radiation and that she should plan to be off for a year. She would be transitioning back to work in October of the following year. She said it was “sort of shocking, but then I thought, well, if that’s what it has to be, then that’s what I will do.” She was fortunate to have full support from her employer.

She said that when the word got out she was amazed by the support that came from all around, including her family and church. She spoke of phone calls she received from people she had not heard from in a long time. She had people praying for her all over the country and that was comforting.

She said that although that was the story of her health transition, she needed to tell about her other transition which was a journey of faith. She said that having breast cancer gave her the strength to face where she was at with her Christian faith. She has gone from being a participating Anglican to someone who rarely goes to church. She believes in God, but has difficulty with Christ and the creeds associated with that doctrine. She said that at this time she is in a process, a transition. Right now her approach to life is about being mindful and present minded so that this gathering and the opportunities it presented were “very interesting”.

Clara was very pragmatic in telling this story. It was a situation presented to her and she dealt with it. The transition around her faith has presented itself in what she described as a most interesting way. At this point she did not elaborate, but it was obvious that it was important to her to share this with the group. In a transition such as this, there are not really any benchmarks or procedures or even rules to follow. It is completely unformulated.

Grace

Grace said that she has been through many transitions in her life, but that the one she was going to bring forward was about moving. Up to this point she has not met many people who have experienced as many moving transitions as she has. As she said, “I don’t move ‘round corners, I have to take a plane.” On reflection she believes that some

of the moves have not been well thought through and the spearhead for all the moves has been her husband. As a woman born in the fifties she felt she had to cooperate. “That was the expectation; there were a lot of societal norms around then.” To this day that pulls her. Her mother was a woman who pushed her boundaries and was very strong and would go for things.

Grace emigrated from England to Canada with her two and a half year old daughter and eleven month old son in January of 1983. Her husband emigrated in October of 1982, and this has been a theme. Two years before, her husband discovered that he could go no further in the firm of which he had been a part for fifteen years. Her husband had a brother and family living in a small town in Saskatchewan and his parents were with them, so in 1976 they went for a month’s holiday to see what it would be like. Grace, who is a “city girl” that loves culture and is a “real go-getter,” told him when they got home that she couldn’t do it.

They were financially struggling. Although she had loved the job she had before the kids were born, the expectation was that she would stay home. She had the routine of sitting in their sunroom, late in the afternoon while her toddler played. On this particular day, something came to her and she thought, “You know, yes, you need to go.” Her husband acted immediately. It took eighteen months to get through everything. In December 1981 they had to fly to Canada to look for employment. Because of new Canadian rules about Canadians filling positions first, it was a back and forth, protracted situation. Grace remembers thinking, “Oh, maybe we’re not going.” She was very busy and did not have the space that she believes transitions require for reflection. When he

did get the call, her husband had a month to leave, and she had three. There was so much to do that when he left, she remembers feeling numb.

The three months on her own were very tough. Her parents did not really talk to her about going. Grace experienced the loneliest time she has ever been through. This was very difficult for her to relate to us as she had not shared her story before. Her faith wavered, although there was “a wonderful minister and she was really good.” She told the story of a difficult Christmas and the complications of moving a household. Grace lost a lot of weight and she watched her little daughter withdraw. She found it very difficult to say goodbye to her family. The trip over and the experience through customs with two small children was nerve wracking. She landed in Saskatchewan on the twenty-third of January. They lived in a small apartment until their household goods arrived from England six weeks later.

The next move happened about ten years later. Her husband moved to British Columbia and was there for a year before she could join him. Grace had just been accepted into an Early Childhood Education program in Saskatchewan. There was an expectation that she would never go to post-secondary school, so this was “huge”. Since then she has gone on to earn two degrees and many certificates related to children and youth. It was a tough year. The school work load was tremendously heavy. She has learned a lot living on her own. She has learned to be independent, but she has also learned that she and her husband can work together and that long distance marriages can work. She learned the importance of being really aware of the children during the moves. Her mother-in-law, who had been widowed, came to stay with them for six months. This was tremendously helpful.

From British Columbia her husband was offered a position in Ontario. At the time their children were going in to grades ten and twelve and Grace had just been accepted into a Master's program in her present location of British Columbia. They had a "family meeting" and it was decided that her husband would take the job. She said that his job always came first and they (she and the children) came second. However, the children did not want to move and so Grace stayed with them for three years, while he went to his job in Ontario. As well as working on her Master's degree through distance education, she was working fulltime. This time Grace got very sick. "I kind of crashed and burned and was in hospital." This postponed the date of her graduation. After the three years, "I was really and truly torn." She had friends and church. The three years had been really hard on their relationship. However, she said that she never starts something that she doesn't finish, so she went. Once again she had to make all the moving arrangements. The move was hard. Her qualifications were not recognized in Ontario and it was difficult getting work.

In May 2008, the industry in which her husband was involved crashed and he was offered a severance package. He was unable to get work and started to look elsewhere. The employment he found was in Alberta. He left Ontario in March and she followed in June. Once again this was a complicated situation because in May she found out that her daughter was pregnant and, as a result, felt very torn about leaving. She said she is still struggling with this transition after three years and she is already looking towards the next move.

Grace told her story poignantly and with great detail. It was necessary to tell the stories of the previous moves in order for us to be able to fully understand the difficulty

of her present transition. As we continued our conversations about transition, I saw a shift with Grace. As she reflected further on her life, and listened to the stories of the other women, I believe she more and more discovered her voice, realized her strength, and felt more confidence. Her speaking voice became stronger, she began to draw from her experience to encourage others and she participated more fully.

Sophia

For Sophia, it was also important to give us some background information in order for us to understand the impact of her husband's illness and ultimate death. When Sophia's daughter was still little, Sophia began to notice personality changes in him. This began the problem of getting anyone to listen to her. She had no satisfaction from either the medical profession or counselors.

As her daughter grew she also began to display peculiar behaviors, including lying and rages. To make matters worse, her first boyfriend sexually abused her. Sophia "almost had a nervous breakdown" and her husband's reaction was to withdraw. She arranged for her daughter to see a counselor at which time she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder.

At the same time her husband's behavior became so bad that she had decided she couldn't live with him anymore. "The living conditions were just too horrible for words. I was asking, begging someone to listen to me, but no one would listen to me." In 2008, following "the Easter from hell," he got up Monday morning in a horrible rage. He drove to work and collapsed. Three months before this she had gone to her family doctor who had said, "Please, Sophia, won't you drop this." She said, "No, I want to talk to a psychiatrist. I desperately want some answers." Her doctor said, "Then will you drop it?"

and she had said, “Okay.” The psychiatrist confirmed that her daughter had borderline personality disorder and she said that her husband was displaying a serious brain problem/disorder. After collapsing he was taken to Emergency where a brain tumor was discovered.

At first Sophia was quite happy because she thought that at last God was going to take care of them and “this awful thing is going to stop.” At the Cancer Centre they were told that he had stage three terminal brain cancer. “I actually went into hysterics and said, ‘Why wouldn’t somebody listen to me?’” The surgeon said the tumor could be dated to over ten years previously.

Sophia went home and phoned her good friend and “thus began the long journey. We had two years of phone calls.” As a couple Sophia and her husband tried counseling with and for their daughter. She told the counselor that her mother had diagnosed her over the internet. It was at that point that Sophia stopped trying to get help for her and she was asked to leave the house. This gave them two years of peace.

Never did Sophia think he would not survive. Occasionally their daughter would “skip back into their lives,” but she was not there for her father. However, Sophia and her husband had “two amazing years together.”

When the tumor came back, Sophia believes she made a big mistake. She wishes they had gone to the Mayo Clinic and looked at other treatments. By the time they had decided to do this, it was too late. There was one treatment that they were willing to do that would cost \$10,000. A doctor told her he “wouldn’t waste the money.” Her last three months of dealing with the clinic were very negative for her and she says she will never deal with them again. Sophia refused to put him in a home. Her family and church family

were “amazing” at this time. In trying to proceed with the treatment plan, he had a series of MRI’s and it could not be determined why they were coming back clear. It then became apparent that the cancer had spread throughout his body. Sophia was told he had about six months to live. That day the family doctor came to put him on morphine. “By some miracle my daughter was there that evening. I fell asleep on the couch. We had a nurse come in to stay so I could sleep. [Her daughter] came running down at ten to four and said, ‘Wake up! Daddy’s going!’ and I said, ‘Going where? And he just passed away.’”

It took her a while to get back to God. As well she was dealing with her daughter. “I think if you’re going through anything you don’t want to be dealing with borderline personality disorder at the same time.” Her church continued to be “amazing”. She says will no longer deal with the medical profession.

At this point in telling the story, Sophia switched to the present. “My life has just been turned around. I’m doing all kinds of things I’ve always wanted to do. I’m learning to play the piano, I’m quilting, I’m sewing, I’m travelling. My faith is stronger than it has ever been.”

Sophia has five “beautiful sponsor kids,” a wonderful Christian family and a wonderful dog. “Life is good.”

Life is never straight forward. Having a daughter with mental illness has been an overwhelming challenge and burden in the midst of sickness and grief. Sophia has been able to find positives and creative outlets in her life that are allowing her to move forward.

Joy

The transition for Joy was losing her job and then wondering what the next steps would be. What has been raised for her is the “big issue of my identity and who I am as a person.” She very much identified with her work and had a very high profile job. She was well recognized and experienced job satisfaction. However, she was also very disliked by a couple of people who had influence, “because I had the limelight.” This raised issues of vulnerability and she “wore masks of ‘this is fantastic.’”

Joy had come out of a “wicked divorce” and had been self-employed for many years. Following her divorce she was able to find “this awesome position for me that over one hundred and fifty people applied for.” She learned a lot and felt she had “ring-side seats at a very prestigious company in the public’s eye.” She then began to see that it was not so wonderful. Although she was responsible for “some of that “rah rah” and the culture piece,” there was “a disconnect” between her values and the company’s values beginning to form. It got so she could no longer reconcile those differences.

She thinks, in her soul, something was calling her to make a change, but she was comfortable. She was a single mom. “I liked the work. I liked the people. I didn’t like the politics. I didn’t like what the company was standing for but I thought, ‘it’s the devil I know.’” She worked for the company for nine years.

Wonderful things were happening outside her work: she was interviewed in the national press; she was featured in magazines and had a high profile; the president of the company requested her services personally; she was invited to be part of a consultation with a federal cabinet minister; she was teaching at Mount Royal and consulting at

Southern Alberta Institute of Technology; she did some work at a prestigious school of business. She thought how “awesome” all this was, and how grateful she felt.

Joy feels she was “pushed from the nest.” Over a year ago, she slipped on ice getting out of her vehicle and suffered a back injury and concussion. She thinks it was the literal push. She was beginning to heal and understand concussion when she was rear ended in a motor vehicle accident and suffered another concussion.

Work was telling her she was well enough to come back from her medical leave, but she knew she was not. She went to all kinds of doctors and medical people for help and diagnosis. She needed to push hard. She was used to functioning at a very high level and “it wasn’t there.” She has finally received a long “grocery list” of what is wrong physically and is beginning to figure out how to deal with that side of things.

Joy was consumed by the thought of never being the same again. In her work experience she had gone through a crisis of confidence and she lacked the physical stamina and, as a result, feels she did not always make the right choices. She made the decision, (“maybe stupid”) that she had to prove herself. She decided to go ahead with a prior commitment for a speaking engagement that she had previously allowed holiday time for. She was on leave and had turned down many work-related offers. She got to the city where the convention was being held the day before so she could rest and take pain medication. She noticed, ten minutes into her talk, someone in the audience who was from her company, and in a position to fire her. Joy “knew that things had changed dramatically in that moment.”

She had heard nothing from work and about ten days later she began to receive emails from colleagues and people from work saying, “Are you okay? Oh my God, we

just heard the news! How can we help you? Oh this can't be so! This isn't right; you've given so much to this place!" Then "where the other shoe dropped was the text that said, 'Tom got fired this week, too.'" At this point she wrote a letter to her vice president, hand delivered it to the office and asked that it be hand delivered to him. It said, "I understand you have plans to terminate my employment with [the company] If this is the case, would you kindly advise me in writing what the conditions are so that I can review this with my counsel?" She received a letter of termination an hour later, by email. "This is the company I *adored* without question—gave my heart and soul to. Although I knew I needed to leave, it wasn't on my terms. This piece was thrust upon me. It wasn't at all my timing or my terms."

She then made up her mind that she just needed to "get on with it", but when the extent of her injuries became apparent—a growth on her spine causing pain and nerve damage, as well as her concussion and not sleeping—she began feeling very overwhelmed. She felt she wanted to give up but she knew she needed to be a good parent for her fourteen-year-old daughter who is the light of her life.

There have been ongoing frustrations, for example, a lawyer who has said it's a "slam dunk" but "ten grand and seven months later and I have no severance." She experienced major flood damage to her house following a brand new renovation. Now little things are getting her down like a printer not working. "It feels like there's so much and all I want to do is dance in the light."

To finish off her story, Joy wanted to share two "metaphors" she has for this time. She was amused to see her pseudonym was *Joy*. Before all this happened and she was trying to summon the courage to leave the company, Joy came up with the mantra "and."

“I want *and* in life, I don’t want *but*. I want *this and*. So it’s *and*, period. *More*, period. I want more. There’s got to be more. There’s got to be another partner, there’s got to be a better scenario. And joy. I felt like the joy had been ripped out over events in life. My joy was diminished. My soul, my gut, my essence is to be a happy person, by decision and by being intentional, but my joy was gone. So I wanted *and more joy, period*. AND MORE JOY. I posted this all over my house and this was my mantra, so thank you for choosing Joy for me.”

The other thing that keeps Joy going is something she learned from a personal coach she was seeing prior to being fired. She was looking at ways to transition to being able to “help people experience a positive experience of life and give something back.” She wanted people to feel that they were “learning and growing and being validated and having a good experience”. She wants to do more than “work for the corporate man, the corporate wealth.” The coach wanted her to come up with a physical manifestation of what this would look like. It came very easily and with absolute clarity that it is *pearls*. She pointed out that she was wearing pearl earrings and had made a conscious decision to wear pearls every day to remind her that the world is her oyster—taking the irritation, taking the thing that was hurtful and bothersome and turning it into something fabulous.

Joy is happy to report that despite the struggles recently, she feels she is getting her “mojo” back. “Part of it is community. Community has been so strong, particularly community of women for me. I have the deepest gratitude.” Gratitude is a big part of her life now as well as finding the little things that bring her joy, like sharing a laugh with her daughter.

Joy believes she will find her “new normal.” She is trying to understand her faith. She can no longer identify with the maleness of God as much as she can with the “she God.” At the same time she is drawing closer and losing herself in the ritual. She is seeing her faith, along with many other things, with “new eyes.” Although she said she was pushed from the nest she feels she is “growing wings on the way down.” “I desperately want to dance in the light.”

Joy is still in transition. This was evident in the way she told her story, making an effort to understand and interpret even as she told it. She is drawing on the success of past transitions, such as her divorce to give her strength, optimism and a sense of priorities.

Ethics

A considerable amount of time was given to the consideration of ethics, as they relate to qualitative research in general and my research specifically. Not only did I want to adhere to the principles of ethics for the sake of personal integrity, I wanted the co-researchers to know that they were being treated with utmost respect and that I saw them as partners in the quest for knowledge. “Embedded in qualitative research are the concepts of relationships and power between researchers and participants.”⁷³

I familiarized myself with, and followed, where relevant, the procedures as outlined in the St. Stephen’s College *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Ethics Review, June 2008).

It has been previously noted that the co-researchers received both a detailed letter of invitation and signed a letter of informed consent, which I also signed. At my instigation we used pseudonyms. I pointed out that this was not a completely foolproof

⁷³ Angelica Orb, Laurel Eisenhauer, Dianne Wynaden, “Ethics in Qualitative Research,” 93.

way of protecting their identity, but they were not anxious about this aspect of the research being published.

I discussed the need for confidentiality with the group and it was agreed that things shared would not be repeated, even with each other, outside the room. I have already alluded to ethics as they relate to the telling of personal stories. As previously mentioned, the need for the respect of each person's story was raised. It was pointed out that we were there to tell our stories, not convince others to our way of thinking. These women were incredibly respectful. I brought these points up out of a duty to ethical responsibility but my sense was that they had come to the research with these "rules" as previously held assumptions. I knew that the choice of co-researchers for this project was crucial to the ethics of it and I felt affirmed in my choice of these women.

Throughout the conversations and the individual interviews, I asked for clarification. One of the things I reminded the women that had been stated in the letter of informed consent was that they would have the chance to read what I wrote. As well as wanting to be accurate in my reporting, I did not want to include anything that could be potentially harmful in anyway. Although three of the four women did not feel the need to receive the manuscript as I wrote it, I felt the need to honour my commitment and sent them the installments anyway. In my reporting of the data, I left out names of companies, organizations and people. Transcribing the taped discussions was laborious as I wished to be meticulous in reporting what the individuals had said, whether directly quoting, paraphrasing or interpreting. In some circumstances I listened to the complete sessions several times and went over certain conversations and phrases repeatedly.

Not only was reflexivity helpful in informing the research, it was a necessary ethic of the process. Slee speaks of reflexivity as having to do with transparency about the research process, evidenced in the way in which the research is conducted and written up, including using the first person to write oneself into the research, building mistakes, errors and changed assumptions in the research and being honest about one's feelings in the research process.⁷⁴ This understanding of reflexivity aligns with mine and I adhered to these principles.

Because each woman knew me I had already established a level of trust and their trust in me extended to trusting the kind of women I would choose to participate with them. One woman I invited declined to participate. She did not feel entirely comfortable with the process and also had a heavy schedule already. She was supportive of my project and I appreciated her honesty with me. The women expressed genuine interest in the project and all said that they would enjoy entering into this process with me. I felt that these were honest sentiments, my opinion of them being that they would not take part if they felt compromised in any way. Given the fact that I knew these women, it made the advice of Farber particularly relevant:

A term that is often used in qualitative research is participant-observer. This term captures the idea that you are part of the study and involved with the participants. While your level of involvement may vary, you are, nonetheless, always involved. Because you are interacting with the participants of your study, it is important to be aware of biases you bring to the study. Your active involvement with participants provides the benefit of close observation. By interacting with participants and developing relationships with them, you have the opportunity to learn information that you otherwise would not have access to. However, you also run the risk of influencing participants and their responses, so it is important that you be very aware of yourself in the process. Before embarking on any qualitative

⁷⁴ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*, 51-52.

researcher endeavor, know yourself. Know your values, your biases, and your fears.⁷⁵

Familiarity could also have been a potential invasion of each woman's privacy and could have potentially interfered with the research process. I was careful not to disclose any information about each of them to the group. I was mindful of wanting to hear their stories for the first time. I wanted to assume an attitude that was respectful to the co-researchers and aided in the research – hearing the story with “new ears.” This was an informative process. It was interesting to listen to a woman's interpretation of a particular event and understand why it was her truth and therefore her reality. It reminded me of the danger of making assumptions about another person's lived experience. The women who knew each other listened intently. If they came in with assumptions, they were willing to have those assumptions changed with new information and fresh insight.

Summary

The world is peopled by travelers each with a journey.
 As we make our way through our own obstacles, we are often oblivious
 to those who travel by our side.
 And yet when we open our hearts to
 the adventures and adversities of others,
 our own journey is illumined.
 Those who travel beside me are my teachers
 and those, I teach in turn.

*Julia Cameron*⁷⁶

The research for this thesis was an extremely positive experience. Using a narrative approach was conducive to the process, and, the nature of narrative inquiry was,

⁷⁵ Nancy K. Farber, “Conducting Qualitative Research: A practical Guide for School Counselors,” 8.

⁷⁶ Julia Cameron, *Transitions: Prayers and Declarations for a Changing Life* (New York: Tarcher/Putnum, 1999), 130.

as referenced by Slee in the methodology chapter, well suited to research with women. It was a privilege to travel with these co-researchers and listen to their stories, both individual and collective. I gained insights in some instances and was affirmed in others. Each person has her own story to tell and her own truth within that story. I am very hopeful that I can take away what has come out of the research and encourage others going through difficult transitions.

The group process was positive for each of the women present. It seems fitting to conclude with some of their comments. These comments came out of the interviews I had with each woman individually.

Joy thanked me for creating magic. She felt that an atmosphere of safety was created and that we all were able to drop our masks. She spoke of a respect for story and that people told their truth. She interpreted this as being healthy. Joy received clarity through speaking and hearing and felt encompassed and buoyant. She also appreciated times of silence to absorb what was being said.

Grace appreciated the process and said that we had a connection that “made it flow.” As well, she appreciated that I allowed for moments of silence. She had never shared her story before, and realized in the telling of it the power of story. She has often considered writing her story and has gone away with a realization that she needs to do this.

After our third group session Sophia went away with a sense that she had been able to “get rid of a lot of poison” and had the best night’s sleep she had had in ages. She said it was the first time she had sat in front of a group of people and stated that her

daughter had a mental illness. She appreciated the fact that the group took this at face value.

Clara said that sharing, or “having the opportunity to verbalize,” is always helpful and that this speaking to others reinforces where she is going and where she is at. Clara thinks of herself as being empathetic but she said that acknowledging each person’s perception of things was “a reality check or a wake up--not all about me.”

Of course these positive comments were nice to hear, but they were also an affirmation of choosing narrative inquiry as the method of research. Their comments confirmed my belief in the potential power and positive energy that can be generated when you gather a group of women in a safe setting.

Thank you, Clara, Grace, Joy and Sophia.

DISCUSSION: AN ACCOUNTING OF THE JOURNEY

“Traveling mercies,” the old people at our church said to her when she left. This is what they always say when one of us goes off for a while. Traveling mercies: love the journey, God is with you, come home safe and sound

Anne Lamott.⁷⁷

Women’s Mid-life Journey: Becoming Me

Yet there is no place so awake and alive as the edge of becoming. But more than that, birthing the kind of woman who can authentically say, “My soul is my own,” and embody it in her life, her spirituality, and her community is worth the risk and hardship.

Sue Monk Kidd⁷⁸

Defining the Passage

As mentioned in the literature review I read about two research projects that examined women in mid-life from a behavioral rather than a biological point of view. One was by Lynn Calhoun Howell in 2001 (“Implications of Personal Values in Women’s Midlife Development”) and the other by Elizabeth Arnold in 2005 (“A Voice of Their Own: Women Moving Into Their Fifties”). Probably the most studied aspect of mid-life for women is that of menopause. Neither of these studies, nor the conversations with my co-researchers indicate this to be the top priority. In Howell’s research the top three priorities with the eighteen women she interviewed were, in order of priority: relationships, material circumstances, and health.⁷⁹ Menopause was just one in a list of

⁷⁷ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 106.

⁷⁸ Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman’s Journey From Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*, 12.

physical manifestations of aging. Also important to some was adopting healthier lifestyles on a variety of levels in order to accomplish what they wanted to do.⁸⁰ Arnold states the following, “Contrary to what is portrayed in the literature, the majority of these study participants did not identify menopause as a benchmark of entry into older adulthood. Only two study participants [out of 23] identified menopause as a triggering event.”⁸¹

In Greider’s article on midlife she uses perimenopause as the umbrella over the midlife journey. However she is examining it more holistically than an approach that is primarily concerned with physical health. She sees this time as an opportunity for “growth and maturation.” Her goal was to have “some guideposts for soul care during women’s passage to menopause—information about perimenopause knitted into soulful, centering, collective wisdom for holistic, midlife living.”⁸² I suggest that women who are at this *age* in their lives but, because of medical implications, do not experience the *physical* ramifications of perimenopause, are experiencing a similar journey. Greider implies this in the title of her publication – *Perimenopause and Other Midlife Opportunities* (emphasis on word “and”). She goes on to state, and this would concur with Howell and Arnold, “Long glossed over by scholars, midlife is coming to be understood as a period of complex development. Indeed, some developmentalists now

⁷⁹ Lynn Calhoun Howell “Issues and Insights: Implications of Personal Values in Women’s Midlife Development.” *Counseling and Values*, 46 (October 2001): 60.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Arnold, “A Voice of their Own: Women Moving Into Their Fifties.” *Health Care For Women International* 26, no. 8, (2005): 639.

⁸² Kathleen J. Greider, “Perimenopause and Other Midlife Opportunities,” *In Her Own Time*, ed., Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 192.

argue that, more than any other period, midlife carries with it an unsurpassed range and depth of personal and relational responsibilities, quandaries and challenges.”⁸³

How One Passage Informs Another

As I transcribed the conversations of the co-researchers, I certainly saw some parallels to the literature in terms of priorities, self-awareness and insights. These themes form the basis for the following chapters. As they spoke about their difficult mid-life transition and complicating factors in it, menopause was not directly mentioned by any of them as a significant factor in negotiating the transition. This is not to dismiss the health issues related to perimenopause/menopause as they were significant for me and resulted in complicating what was in and of itself a difficult transition.

Sophia spoke of menopause being used as a label against her. She had great difficulty in getting anyone, including the medical profession, to hear what she was saying about her husband’s personality changes, which were eventually attributed to a brain tumor. There was one instance when she was dismissed as being menopausal and thus unstable.

What became apparent is that one of the resources that women have to draw on to negotiate a difficult transition in midlife is their own wisdom that comes from their own life experiences. For example, the concept of finding a voice was a key part of the co-researchers conversation to the extent that I have devoted a complete chapter to this subject. When asking the women why, during this particular transition, they found their voice in a way that had not happened previously, Grace said, “It’s a privilege of age.” Clara added that it is “a confidence in who we are.”

⁸³ Ibid., 193.

Research demonstrates that mid-life is a time of questioning and reassessing assumptions and values. It is also a time of taking stock. Joy referred to arriving at age 50 with a “divine discontent in life” and “a huge desire not to go to a job but to create a life for my daughter and myself”. A difficult transition can be the catalyst for this process. Howel refers to this stage of development as a time of self-reflection and examination of values. She asserts that, according to the model that emerged from her research,

...midlife commenced when women became distressed by an accumulation of changes in their lives. They addressed the discomfort by examining both the new developments in their lives (‘changing circumstances’) and their own personal values. Eventually, the women used insights arising from the examination process to make changes in their life circumstances, attitudes, and behaviors until they perceived that they had achieved a balance.⁸⁴

In my view, the co-researchers in the group were well adjusted, self-reflective women. They were able to use past experiences and life lessons to inform their particular transition. This was especially evident with Grace. Her mid-life transition was a move across three provinces and the probability of yet another move. However, her whole adult life has been punctuated with distance moves that have seen her husband go on ahead for long periods of time leaving her behind to cope with moving logistics, children, illness and loneliness. In order to talk about her mid-life move(s) it was necessary to tell her past moving stories. These experiences had been incredibly difficult emotionally and physically and what she had learned through them has very much informed her present day reality. Joy, on more than one occasion, referred to her divorce (a former transition), when giving voice and understanding to her present job loss transition.

⁸⁴ Lynn Calhoun Howell “Issues and Insights: Implications of Personal Values in Women’s Midlife Development,” 54.

This ability to look at past events and learn from them can be an asset to women in mid-life. Unlike the adolescent or young woman who has her whole life before her, choices take on a sense of urgency, a now or never scenario. Joy spoke of “unfinished business” as one of the motivators to keep going. In referring to this time in her life, she said:

I don't know what it is that we fear and [not being afraid] comes with getting real with ourselves at some age and stage, when we decide to be authentic and damn the consequences. It's more important for me to live my life; and this is something I came to about a year ago. I'm tired of wanting to be someone else. I want to be the best me I can be and I'll turn up every day and I don't need to be taller, shorter, thinner, heavier, this degree or that degree. I just need to be me and that's enough.

Knowing that she has come through difficult periods in life having gained knowledge and wisdom is providing the confidence to move forward. In speaking of herself at this stage in life, Grace said, “I like who I am. There is a physical us and an internal us. We have to like the internal us.” This confidence provides fertile ground for personal growth. Irene Henderson addresses the issue of self-knowledge in this way, using the term *menopausal* with a developmental connotation:

...it is not uncommon for menopausal women to ask a core question similar to one faced earlier in adolescence: *Who am I?* Yet unlike adolescence, when women were embarking on a world that in many ways was theirs to define (that is, a world of education, career, partner, decisions rearing children, and so forth), menopausal women are faced with asking that question joined with an equally poignant one: *Who have I become?*⁸⁵

This question of *who I have become* really was at the core of our conversations. As three of the women looked back at their transitions, they were looking at who they had become and Joy was looking at whom she was becoming. They spoke of the factors

⁸⁵ Irene Henderson, “Betwixt and Between Again : Menopause and Identity,” *In Her Own Time: Women and Developmental Issues in Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 218.

that contributed to this state of becoming. They also seemed comfortable with the fact that there would be further transitions that would continue to shape them. As these women looked ahead to continuing their life journey they knew what they wanted to carry with them and what they wanted to leave behind. This is an important aspect of successfully negotiating a transition and becoming a new person. Rupp talks about transformation and uses the metaphor of a snake shedding its skin.

So many skins have fallen off of “me” in my midlife journey. My “skins” have included old messages and assumptions about life that developed in my childhood, behaviors that bound me to unhealthy ways of approaching life, religious beliefs that kept my spiritual world too small, and boxed-in views of my self-identity. Skin-shedding has been a time of discovering what keeps me from growing. I have pursued truth, albeit unwillingly at times, and have discovered both treasures and trash in my life. Whenever I have shed any of these skins of mine, I have found freedom and truth.⁸⁶

Summary

Mid-life is a time of personal growth and development in all aspects of life. It is inevitable that this period in a woman’s life is going to be one of transition. When an extraordinary and difficult event occurs that precipitates a major life transition, mid-life can actually be a resource on which to draw. I would go so far as to say that women in mid-life have the potential to be poised and ready for a difficult transition. Mid-life provides the backdrop for personal reflection and a desire and urgency to know *who I am and who I want to be*. It also provides the wisdom of life as a series of stages and situations.

Clara sums this up well:

*I know I’m resilient.
Time heals all.
I believe in impermanence.*

⁸⁶ Joyce Rupp, *Dear Heart, Come Home: The Path of Midlife Spirituality*, 106.

*What I have now is great.
What is down the road?
Doors close; doors open – not to worry.*

Faith: Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land

*So now, my dear brothers and sisters let us sing,
not to delight our leisure, but to ease our toil.
In the way travelers are in the habit of singing;
sing but keep on walking.
-St. Augustine⁸⁷*

A Personal Reflection

In acknowledgement of the fact that our faith is so deeply personal, it was important for me to be particularly reflexive when approaching this part of the research. When I examine my personal theology, I realize that my eschatological point of view affects how I look at the subject of transition. Dietrich Bonhoeffer viewed our time on earth as the *penultimate*,⁸⁸ to me another name for *transition*. His part in the resistance movement in Germany eventually had him killed. He spent the last of his earthly days in prison and was remarkably able to maintain an air of optimism, both for this earthly world and his view of the heavenly world. I believe this to be a positive view to hold when in the midst of a difficult transition.

There are people who regard [optimism] as frivolous and some Christians think it impious for anyone to hope and prepare for a better earthly future. They think that the meaning of present events is chaos, disorder, and catastrophe; and in resignation or pious escapism they surrender all responsibility for reconstruction and for further generations. It may be that the Day of Judgment will dawn

⁸⁷ Quoted in Kathleen Norris: *The Cloister Walk*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 167.

⁸⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* Revised Edition. Edited by Geoffrey B Kelly and F. Burton Nelson. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995, 366.

tomorrow; in that case we shall gladly stop working for a better future. But not before.⁸⁹

Many adults and children alike have delighted in the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis. The magical adventures told in this series of books are theological and Christological in nature without actually mentioning God or Jesus. The four key children in the books are featured in the final book of the series *The Last Battle*. In this book the children are on a train that crashes and they are killed. The way their death is portrayed is beautiful and hopeful:

And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.⁹⁰

Bonhoeffer and Lewis present definitions of our earthly life and a heavenly life in a way that can positively inform a difficult transition. We must live our present life to the fullest – for ourselves and for others, with the understanding that all our life is a transition moving toward something wonderful which we cannot as yet comprehend. The idea that life is transitory and that there is more to life than what we are presently experiencing has the potential to give us a positive, hopeful perspective.

Jesus' ministry and that of his followers was one of movement. Michael L. Lindwell says, "Jesus is the quintessential *traveling* preacher. He could have founded a school in Nazareth and stayed put, but the gospel accounts describe his ministry as one that is almost constantly on the road. Jesus seldom seems to stay in one place for more

⁸⁹ Ibid. 485.

⁹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: MacMillan, 1956) 173-174.

than a few days. He travels so that the gospel might be more widely proclaimed, of course.”⁹¹ I have realized that many of the stories of Jesus miracles occurred while he was on the way from one place to another. Stories such as the healing of the woman with an issue of blood, the healing of blind Bartimaeus, the woman at the well, the story of Zacheus and the healing of the centurion’s son come to mind. The Road to Emmaus tells a Resurrection story of Jesus meeting people who are, not only on their way, but they are going away. As these events happen *on the way*, Lindwell asserts that there is a deeper meaning in Jesus’ travel, which I would say refers to the penultimate and ultimate.”⁹²

But the narrative center of the Gospels is not simply evangelical itinerating; rather it is a journey “up to Jerusalem,” a geographical and spiritual movement toward confrontation, calling, and cross that is historical and emblematic at the same time. More than a few of Jesus’ parables are stories about journeys, most famously the prodigal son and the Good Samaritan.”⁹³

Our life is a transition beginning with birth, which is a miracle surrounded by mystery and ending with death, another mystery. Joyce Rupp refers to death as the “ultimate pilgrimage home.”⁹⁴

The example of Jesus’ ministry *on the way* gives credence to the idea that opportunities occur as we are moving through life, not “when we get there”. This is the important time of growth, which could be called *transition*. It is a crucial time for transformation.

⁹¹ Michael L. Lindwell “Faith as Journey.” *The Clergy Journal* (March, 2008): 12.

⁹² Elizabeth Short, “Christianity as Pilgrimage” Unpublished Essay, 2013, 3.

⁹³ Michael L. Lindwell “Faith as Journey,” 12.

⁹⁴ Joyce Rupp, *Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino*, 255.

Rupp speaks of her life as being “united with the community of pilgrims, with everyone who walks the continuing road of life with a sense of purpose and direction.”⁹⁵

Her definition of a pilgrim gives shape to my understanding of our life on earth.

To be a pilgrim is to be willing to live with the mystery of what will happen both interiorly and exteriorly as one walks day after day toward the destination of the sacred site. What happens inside cannot be planned or mapped out in the same way that the physical route is mapped. Becoming a pilgrim means there are no maps of the heart. One simply holds onto the hand of the Great Pilgrim and travels with hope that one day the spiritual benefits of the road will reveal themselves and be understood.

In being a pilgrim, the journey itself is of prime importance.⁹⁶

I came into the research with an articulated faith. However, like many, I had doubts along the way. “I believe; help my unbelief!”⁹⁷ At the time of my difficult transition I was fortunate to be studying at St. Stephen’s College. Their breadth of view and encouragement to consider both theology and faith provided me with a safe, yet challenging place to explore.

One thing I held onto during my shattering divorce was that although a lot of things could be taken away from me, no one could take my faith. I received strength and comfort from the Romans passage that speaks of nothing separating us from the “love of God in Christ Jesus” and would even insert names and situations into the list of things that did not have power over my faith:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ibid., 256-257.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁷ Mark 9:24, New Revised Standard Version

⁹⁸ Romans 8:38-39, New Revised Standard Version

My life is a pilgrimage and I went into the research excited to meet fellow pilgrims and hear the stories of where their faith had taken them and was taking them. We would walk side by side for a short while.

Sharing as Pilgrims

Each of us has a camino, a road of life. This road allows us access to the spiritual richness of those who travel with us now. All loving persons we encounter leave a touch of their positive, growth-filled goodness. We can slip into this energy as easily as my hand slipped into the deeply indented print in the marble pillar of St. James Cathedral.

Whether our sources of spiritual energy traveled life's path long ago or are still on it today, these people of faith are our teachers and catalysts of inspiration. Like pilgrims on the road to Santiago, their goodness empowers us as we set out each day to face the unknown, the beautiful, the challenging, and the rewarding facets of our historical journey. This potent energy stirs in our dreams, permeates our tough decisions with wisdom, and infuses hope into every new beginning.⁹⁹

When the co-researchers were sharing their stories of transition and how these transitions have informed their present lives, particularly in their stories of faith, I had a sense that we were journeying together for a while. Our paths had crossed and our passage was being enriched by the mindful presence of each woman. Because of her unique life experiences and personality each woman saw the path in a different light and had her own sense of the destination. This added to the richness of our short walk together. We benefited from each other and were encouraged to keep moving along.

I shared with the co-researchers a passage I had written in a journal that I kept when my marriage was falling apart. At this time so many aspects of my life seemed foreign. I was devastated. While reflecting on Psalm 137, I had asked myself, "How can

⁹⁹ Joyce Rupp, *Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino*, 32.

I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" I needed to make sense of my faith and figure out how, as Psalm 98 says, to "Sing a new song unto the Lord."¹⁰⁰

Each of these women shared stories of their faith. They shared both how their faith affected their transition and how their transition impacted their faith. For each woman faith figured prominently in her transition experience. There were specific questions regarding how faith played a role in each of the co-researcher's transition. What was interesting was that the theme of faith wove its way throughout our conversations as they spoke of various aspects of their lives. Through her research on women's faith development Slee's findings would concur. She asserts that faith is "an orderly and patterned deep structure in women's lives which integrates and gives coherence to all the disparate events of their lives."¹⁰¹

Throughout my personal transition, participation in the Eucharist was a necessity. In it I found a place to come, with hands outstretched, asking for Christ to be with me, to comfort and heal. For the three women who had stayed in one place, their parish communities were mentioned as being important, as were the prayers of other people. Joy spoke of loving the ritual of the Anglican Church and being able to lose herself in it and yet at times struggling with patriarchy. Clara, unlike the others has moved away from a Christian perspective in her faith. "All of a sudden my Anglican Christian Faith is not what it was." Other than these few references there wasn't any discussion about how (or if) the traditions and teachings of the Anglican church had impacted their transition. Slee speaks of "the centrality of a relational consciousness to the women's faith lives, largely

¹⁰⁰ Psalm 98, New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁰¹ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*, 164.

confirming the hypothesis that women's identity, development and spirituality are embedded in a strong sense of connectedness to the other."¹⁰² This definitely seemed to be the case for these women.

My questions did not lead them to discuss the aspects of Anglicanism that informed their faith or assisted in their transitions, and it wasn't, when asked about faith, how they contextualized it. They saw faith in a broader sense, and that was fine for the purposes of this study. What would have been interesting would have been to hear from Joy, Sophia and Grace if the Anglican Church, with its particular emphasis on sacraments and liturgy, was serving them well.

Joy: Coming to Terms With Why

Joy spoke of having many journeys around faith. Her partner, who died six years ago, was a Buddhist and she resonates with some of those practices. She also draws from nature and in the past has had some native spirituality "inklings."

She has experienced a series of difficult situations and transitions in her life and has often asked the question, "Why?" She came to a point in her life when she really stepped back. She had thought of herself as a "cradle to grave Anglican" but that was called into question. "[I] thought, I've been a pretty good person; thought I practiced this faith I was born into [I don't] understand why [this is happening]. So where is gift in it? Silver lining? What is something I can learn?" In the last year, however, she has learned to say, "Okay, God, you've got the bigger plan. You haven't let me down in the past. Things have worked out in retrospect."

¹⁰² Ibid., 159.

Joy has reflected on moments of what she has called “divine intuition” during difficult times and has “listened to that,” and found it to be “bang on” She has drawn from this retrospective look at her relationship with God and has developed a sense of what that means. “What you want from me is for me to draw near in faith and I want that. So speak to me. Give me clarity.” Coming to terms with the “why” in her faith has certainly informed the role faith is playing in her present transition and has presented her with an ability to trust and to just be. She said that more recently she is saying, “Okay, I’m crawling up in your lap – so here I am.”

Grace: An Interior Journey

Because of her many moves, Grace was never able to be as immersed in a church community as were the other women. However, church was where, at times she was able to find community.

Prayer and the interior life are important to Grace. She believes that connecting with God and her spirit and soul requires her to go within. When discussing the meaning of courage Grace saw courage coming from her faith/spirituality and trusting to go within herself. She said that “when things are overwhelming, you need a foundation.” She recalled a time when she was very ill. It was during one of those in between times when her husband had moved and she had not joined him. He was only home briefly and had to leave while she was still incredibly sick and weak and had no one to help. One day, while lying in bed, she looked out the window and saw what looked like stained glass. At that moment she realized, “God is with me no matter what,” and from that time on, began to get better. She said that prayer saved her, or to put it another way, helped her to save herself.

Grace sees the soul as a sacred place and believes it needs to be protected. As life takes us “around the block,” it can become bruised.

Grace spoke of walking her dogs in the evening, finding a quiet spot, and looking at the stars and the moon. She remembers one time being at the top of a hill, looking up and shouting, “Why can’t I get a job?” She went on to say that soon after she did get a job. That was reaffirming for her that she had “really put it out there with some emphasis, with some meaning.” She said that “You can’t just keep everything inside and pray quietly. You need to talk it out, ‘put it out to the universe’ as they say.”

Sophia: Casting Out Fear

Sophia recalled a time after her husband died when she was dealing with her mentally ill daughter. She no longer had her husband to talk to about this difficult situation. Her response to the situation was, “Thank God [that] God is huge!”

When her husband was first diagnosed with a brain tumor she was happy that she finally knew what had been causing the behavioral issues for the past ten years and was sure that “God is going to cure him and this awful thing is going to stop.” She never thought that he would not survive. Throughout this time her faith was exceedingly important to her and she said that when the doctors and medical staff were ready to give up, she told them that she had a “higher authority.” After two years he died. She said, “It took a while to get back to God. I was pretty angry. I think I was more stunned than angry.” Two or three days after his death (which, for her was a long time), she went back to her prayer chain, which involves praying for people in her parish in need of strength or healing. She has a bible that she has been reading through once a year since 2002. She

stopped reading it when he died but about six months afterwards she resumed reading it and caught up.

Since this ordeal Sophia feels that her faith is stronger than ever. Throughout the telling of her story she referred to her Christian community as family and used words like “amazing,” and “strong”. She said they were always behind her.

One thing this experience has taught Sophia is not to be afraid of death or dying. She believes that “Death is the ultimate transition. It puts everything in perspective.” She has visited people who are dying and has “wonderful chats about where they are going”. Losing the fear of death has had the causal response to not fear life, she is embarking on all kinds of adventures whole heartedly.

Sophia’s faith is a frame of reference throughout her daily life as well as when she looks inward or back on a situation. This is how she makes sense of things.

Clara: In Transition

Clara has gone to the Anglican Church all her life and the same parish for most of her adult life. She is incredibly fond of her community there and has found comfort in the form of the love, support and prayers that she has received from them. She believes that the “energy and prayers may have contributed to my healing.”

When Clara was diagnosed with breast cancer she was already questioning aspects of her faith. “My spiritual journey had started going in a different direction and illness gave me permission to ask the question, ‘Where am I going with my faith?’” She is grateful that she was given the opportunity to “come real.” My interpretation of what she was saying is that her illness was a transition within the larger transition of her faith

journey. She spoke of her cancer journey and her faith journey as being integrated.

Having the opportunity to talk about transition was “very timely.”

Clara believes that God leads her life. “When I go to church, which is rarely, I’m all about God and God leading my life. There is no doubt.” She has no difficulty saying the Lord’s Prayer. What she has difficulty with are the Creeds and “the idea of Christ dying to save me from myself.”

She sees her faith as being in process. She is exploring different ideas, such as that of Buddhism and is reading different books. She has come to a point where she is at peace with this process. As in her approach to life, Clara is able to be pragmatic about this journey she is on. “I’ve said, ‘Hey, this is my life and this is what is real for me.’ I don’t know how it’s going to evolve and I don’t project how it is going to go.”

Clara found this research process and the opportunity presented to be really exciting because “God really works in interesting ways.” She spoke of how we are all on our journeys and that from time to time our paths may cross. She believes there is a reason why they cross and interact.

Summary

All of the women referred to Christian community and their involvement in it. It was also evident that they were enthusiastic about sharing their faith within this safe environment. What was very apparent was that each woman had a deeply personal faith. For each of them it created an inner resource on which to draw.

Each of them has been self-reflective about her faith and although it might be more obvious in Clara’s story it has been fluid for all of them.

I spoke at the beginning of this chapter about faith as a pilgrimage in life. For a brief time we were fellow pilgrims. I watched community form as the conversations progressed, particularly in the third and final gathering. I believe people have an innate desire for community and when people come together in a safe place with a common purpose it begins to form. Conversation became more animated as the women got to know each other and they became more immersed in each other's stories. They began asking questions of each other and gave voice to encouragement and affirmation. This research allowed me to be both a witness and participant in a journey of the saints. It was sacred space.

Finding My Voice

*On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.*

Psalm 138.3¹⁰³

*All that we do now must be done
in a sacred manner and in celebration.
For we are the ones we have been waiting for.*
Margaret Wheatley¹⁰⁴

Searching

The research began with each co-researcher sharing the story of her transition. The next part was to ask questions about influences. We began with family. When Grace shared about her family she gave some background that provided information about her family dynamic. Her parents had shared very little about their lives and did not have

¹⁰³ Psalm 138, New Revised Standard Version

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Wheatley, *Perseverance* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2010), 125.

conversations in front of the children, so that when a crisis or extreme situation occurred (like immigrating) “everyone went into their own corner, nobody talked.” While explaining this to us she queried, “Why didn’t I ask questions?” This brought us to the topic of finding a voice. When asked, she replied that finding your voice is “huge in transitions.” Everyone agreed and a lively conversation ensued.

I had not included the topic of *voice* in my questions for the co-researchers. However, when the topic arose, it led into what was the most animated discussion we had together, with all four women participating. It was a theme that continued to surface throughout the rest of the conversations and it also arose when I interviewed the co-researchers separately. We found that it was tied to the topics of boundaries, labels, and the masks we wear.

These co-researchers taught me the significance of finding a voice. They also taught me that the ability to articulate, both to self and others, is an important aspect in successfully negotiating a difficult transition.

Finding

When Sophia saw the personality changes in her husband, nobody would listen. Not only was this frustrating but it was demoralizing because it made her feel invisible. This went on for ten years. When the tumor was finally diagnosed, a surgeon told her that it had probably been growing for that length of time. “Why wouldn’t anybody listen?” she asked with exasperation. Another frustration was trying to get others to understand what she was going through. Her husband often acted like one person in public and a different person at home. At this time she was also living the nightmare of a daughter with Borderline Personality Disorder. She too could be very charming with people. Because of this, Sophia’s voice, at times, lacked credibility. She had one friend who,

throughout this ordeal, would listen without judgment or question. She believes this was an important key in getting through what could have potentially been an insurmountable challenge.

Sophia came through this experience with the resolve that she would find her voice and learn to speak up. This is still something she is adjusting to – “Before nobody ever listened, but now, people listen. It’s scary. Before [I could] say anything and nobody listened, so it didn’t matter what you said, but now...”

Joy responded to Sophia’s comments with a pertinent question, “What is the catalyst? What makes it so that you cannot be heard and then *be* heard?” Grace responded by saying, “I think that’s connecting with God and your own spirit and your soul, and realizing that not everything is external—you have to go within to find that. [You are] drawing more on your own resources.” Parker J. Palmer has written a little book about vocation entitled *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. This internal voice that Grace is referring to is the same voice he refers to when defining vocation, “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there,’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice “in here” calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.”¹⁰⁵ When we are able to really listen to that inner voice, it gives us the confidence to speak up in ways that people will listen. Just as our vocation can spring from that internal voice, so can our ability to move forward in our lives, and grow in strength and character.

As discussed in the chapter about mid-life, the ability to find your voice is something that is often part of this stage of life. The women expressed an attitude of

¹⁰⁵ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: JosseyBass, 2000), 10.

urgency. They were dissatisfied with the way things had been and felt a strong need and desire to develop their voices and, by doing so, their proper place in the world.

Having the ability to speak up was not only satisfying in and of itself for Clara, but was an exciting measure of developing as a person. She said, with animation, that she would *never*; even a year ago, have spoken up the way she does now. She would have, “eaten it – breathe it in and breathe it out and it would pass by. But now I do that [speak out]. If people ask me my opinion I say, ‘This is what I think,’ and sometimes I ask myself, ‘Did I say that?’”

Sophia spoke further to the idea of invisibility. She said that now when she goes to her doctor, she listens to her and doesn’t argue with her. Her doctor is no longer “looking at me as housewife/mother gone over the edge.”

Clara felt that, coming through her transition, she is no longer afraid of “wasting where I’m at.” She feels she has reached a place where she has developed an attitude of “what do I have to lose? What am I afraid of?” Clara came from a family that was quite typical of the time. Her parents were married in 1948. They had a good relationship, but her mother did everything for her father and family, and did not speak up for herself. Clara thought that she too was often not heard and developed the attitude that “If you speak and people don’t listen, you stop speaking.” She sees finding her voice as an evolution. “It amazes me on many different levels. Just about every day (weekly) I’ll encounter something and I will think it and I will speak it. My intention is not to be hurtful, but to be honest.” She used the example of a conversation with her boss when she felt he wasn’t hearing what she was saying and wasn’t being respectful. She was able to call him on that. “You know, [Bob], it’s really not okay to speak to me that way.”

Grace realized that, as a young mother, she did not have “somebody to really talk to, to help ask the right question. As she looks back at this time in her life she realizes that a key thing for her was that she didn’t know “the right question to ask.”

Letting Go and Speaking Up

An important aspect of transition is the ability to let go of things that are keeping us from becoming the people we are meant to be. “To find the new, you must first relinquish the old.”¹⁰⁶ Joy realized that she had to be honest about naming what had happened to her. “I don’t have to be ashamed. Okay, I was fired. I have had huge shame around that, a horrible stigma. I’m finding so much freedom in just naming it and owning it. This is not a bad thing – it might be the best thing that ever happens to me.” It wasn’t just a matter of acknowledging this, it was important to say it out loud – to voice it.

In our final interview Clara came back to the subject of finding her voice. In looking back at her life she realized that she had always been a “pleaser”, possibly as a way to get attention, but not in a dishonest way. She said that on this side of her transition, “I have a voice; I verbalize. If I have an emotional response, I’ll look inside and use my voice.” She spoke of a balance of listening and speaking. She feels that this self-awareness is allowing her to “live her truth” and that letting go of the need to please others has actually allowed her to be more self-reflective and develop as a person.

Not having a voice created a lonely situation for Grace. Throughout her moves she realized that “Nobody ever asked me what it was like.” She shared her story for the first time with us. These conversations in which she has participated have made her realize how important it is for her to write her own story and that there is great power in story. Writing a book will give voice to a lot of her life that for many years has been kept

¹⁰⁶ William Bridges, *The Way of Transition: Embracing life’s most difficult moments*, 8.

quiet. It will assist her in moving on with her life. Again, the importance of sharing our story was demonstrated. “Whether a grandmother, mother, sister, mentor, or friend, many women relied upon others to help them find their own voices.”¹⁰⁷

Further assisting Grace in the ability to move on was hearing her *own* voice and “recognizing this voice is a *new* voice. [I] can be surprised that I had that voice within me. [You] learn something about yourself at that time.” Letting go of old held self-assumptions and embracing the new can be life-giving and propel us towards the other side of our transition, the new reality.

Something that Clara needed to let go of was the fact that she was conflicted about speaking up with her parish community about where her spiritual journey was taking her. She said, “Going away from my Christian phase to places where I’m exploring and doing different reading—still God, still a faith, still a lot of similarity—trying to communicate that to senior women! When the opportunity has arisen to share that, I was thinking in advance how I would be judged.” Recently she took action and had the conversation with her parish priest. “I just laid it out and he said, ‘Oh that’s interesting,’ and I realized that was really not that difficult.” She has realized, “This is my life and this is what is real for me.” As well as voicing her thoughts, she has also been able to listen to her own voice. “This is all part of having this voice to say, “Hey, these people in authority, whether my boss or minister, we’re all people. I don’t have to run away.” This opening up has the potential to be a catalyst in continuing to move ahead in her faith transition.

¹⁰⁷ Sandra Ford Walston, *Courage: The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001), 182.

When discussing the role of boundaries in transitions, Joy drew attention to the role of boundaries in communication—“how we communicate, what we communicate and with whom we communicate.” There are things she would like to say to those who terminated her employment. For now she acknowledges these thoughts, but does not voice them. She believes, “I will have the chance to respond but it will be in the form of a thank you note.” It is my opinion that to be able to pause and reflect before speaking is a beneficial attribute in the art of voice. She believes that by taking control of how she will respond in a situation and making choices about what she is unwilling to do are ways that she can set boundaries and have some control of her life.

Part of setting boundaries was the ability to say “no”. When Clara got sick she was very involved in a variety of volunteer roles. She gave them all up. Now, two years later, she is careful what and how much she does. The other women also related ways in which they have had to learn to say “no”. Grace had to resist the inclination to over extend herself with volunteering. Sophia, in her effort to be helpful to others, sometimes was left with the feeling that she had been taken advantage of. She talked about having to learn that it was alright to say no to requests for help, or not volunteer her services.

Another aspect of communication for Clara was the dissemination of information—what and to whom, particularly as it pertained to her illness. She feels she has finally learned to communicate to people “from an I feel/need place.” By setting these boundaries, Clara felt she had some control over her life at a time when a lot of control had been taken away.

Clara, Grace and Sophia all spoke of being surprised to hear themselves speak up and articulate their thoughts out loud. These have been moments of insight when they

have looked at themselves and seen the new people they are becoming. It is a positive experience that I believe encourages and motivates them. Sandra Ford Walston engaged in a major research project about women and courage. When referring to this idea of speaking up/out, she says, “Expressing one’s thoughts and feelings in language frees the spirit.”¹⁰⁸ The tone of our conversations about finding voice confirmed this.

The Cover Up

*I had come to a delicate place in my life
When I needed to find the courage to be myself
Sue Monk Kidd¹⁰⁹*

I believe that women are good at wearing masks and I would claim that part of developing authentically is related to the ability to remove these masks. This has been a challenge in my own life and I credit some of my personal growth with developing the ability to express myself honestly. Arnold talks about women in mid-life coming to this point. As discussed in the chapter on mid-life I would assert that an extraordinary mid-life transition will accentuate the need.

What becomes clear is that women in this stage of life consciously seek the time and opportunity to experience themselves in a more complete way. There seems to be a growing awareness that time is precious and needs to be lived in the moment. Self-affirmation comes from shedding masks that no longer fit and developing ways of being consistent with inner self-truths that do fit.¹¹⁰

The idea of “wearing masks” came up a few times in the conversations. When somebody referred to it during a discussion about finding a voice, the women agreed that taking off their masks was actually an aspect of speaking up. Finding their voices wasn’t

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 158.

¹⁰⁹ Sue Monk Kidd, *Firstlight: The Early Inspirational Writings of Sue Monk Kidd*, 172.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Arnold “A Voice of their Own: Women Moving Into Their Fifties,” 641.

only a matter of speaking up, though. It was about each woman allowing herself to speak out loud with honesty and authenticity. Joy said that she has tried to find learning in all her life transitions and to “find my voice and the strength to keep saying what is important to me to be authentic.”

Joy introduced the idea that transitions, in one way or another, have an aspect of invisibility—no identifiable sign, like a cast on the arm—which makes it easier to hide behind a mask. Grace concurred with this and spoke of using the idea of masks in her work with people. She believes that generally more women wear masks than men. She has actual masks for women to work with in order to visualize and discuss the concept.

Joy said that she was great at wearing masks. As in other examples I have related, this had, in part, to do with a need to project herself as a certain type of person. When she had to deal with the emotional impact of losing her job, she still wanted to hide behind her mask. “I’m the one that gets the call at three in the morning, not the one who makes the call.” When it came to speaking to her family she felt that she would be “judged by the tribe” and felt she needed to hide behind a mask. She realized that she was projecting her own judgment of herself and then was able to say to her brother, “Thank you for not judging me.” As she related this she said that she experienced a great relief which led her to differentiate between a mistake and regret. “A mistake is something you live with all your life versus regret you can move beyond. “ This moment of clarity enabled her to move ahead and it would not have occurred had she avoided the conversation with her brother.

The author Sue Monk Kidd relates an experience she had during a story telling workshop. It speaks poignantly to both the subject of letting go and the need to remove our masks.

One of the participants had attended a “clowning” workshop just before the session and showed up wearing a white clown face and a gigantic red smile painted ear to ear. When it came time for her to tell her story, I expected a happy tale to match her face. Instead she told about her husband’s death seven years earlier and how she had been stuck in grief ever since.

It was such a contradiction to see her tell this story of pain while wearing a big red clown smile, and I mentioned the irony of it.

She thought a moment. “You know, maybe that’s why I’ve been trapped in grief. For seven years I’ve been crying on the inside and smiling on the outside. Creating the illusion of happiness was easier than facing the hurt.”

When I ache with a problem, I sometimes think of that woman as a reminder that help and healing do not come when we pretend and mask our pain, but rather when we are honest and admit our need.¹¹¹

Sophia referred more than once to feeling that she had been labeled in negative ways and because of that wasn’t heard. Joy reflected that it would appear that women in particular can be held back because of labels. She wondered if this had something to do with a lack of assertiveness. She felt that it was something, as women, we needed to break through. Clara also saw this as a barrier through which to break. She used the example of the president of Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) who is often introduced as “the first woman president of SAIT.” She would rather move beyond that label to her earned credentials. I would add to this discussion by saying that as women we can also label ourselves using words such as *just* and *only*.

Courage - Uncovering

When I introduced the idea of *courage* all of the women were reticent to acknowledge themselves as being courageous. I believe that it was their interpretation of the word and the way in which our society uses it. What arose in the discussion was that

¹¹¹ Sue Monk Kidd, *Firstlight: The Early Inspirational Writings of Sue Monk Kidd*, 27-28.

it appeared to be a way of “labeling,” things that other people said about a person in articles such as obituaries. They saw the definition pertaining to something being conquered and found it to be a masculine term. I explained that I was looking at courage as defined by Ford Walston in her book, “Courage,” coming from “the Old French corage (heart and spirit).”¹¹² All agreed that if the definition was that you drew on inner resources or, as Sophia said, “follow your heart and intuition,” they would be more comfortable with the definition. Ford Walston addresses this in her book: “Rather than seeing strength and courage as part of the gentle fabric and soul of any woman, such images depict courage as unusual and atypical, and usually with a masculine bravado... Indeed, we will know that we have achieved equality when women are noted and praised for their unique brand of steadfast courage.”¹¹³ I have come to the conclusion that, in sharing what I have learned about transitions with others, it would be helpful to reclaim the word *courage*. Finding and using your voice is, to me, an act of courage. “Living *out loud* will galvanize your innate power to make courageous choices.”¹¹⁴

Summary

Finding your voice and using it is an important component in successfully negotiating a difficult transition. Women in mid-life can come to the point of dissatisfaction with their ideas and needs being unknown. They desire to be honest with themselves and are concerned with who they are becoming. A difficult transition adds credence to this desire. The co-researchers had come to a juncture in their lives where

¹¹² Sandra Ford Walston, *Courage: The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman*, 22.

¹¹³ Sandra Ford Walston, *Courage: The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman*, 19.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

they were ready and able to stand up and be heard—by themselves and others. Finding their voices has empowered them and given them confidence and a positive self-image. It is one of their new realities.

Ford Walston sums this up well:

The courage to speak up is more than just being assertive. Being assertive means behaving in a direct way to achieve your goals. Speaking up is an essential part of self-respect. The courage to speak up also means that you put yourself first. Keeping quiet about your ideas, feelings, and desires because you fear disapproval puts you in an inferior position. Speaking up allows you to live according to your values.

The courage to speak up provides a woman with authenticity. Censoring yourself fosters powerlessness. Saying what you think, even at the risk of disagreeing with others, gives you further strength. Trusting your voice allows you to retain your integrity.¹¹⁵

Raising the Anchor: Letting Go

No and Yes

I want to say NO

No to regret

No to guilt

No to depression

No to over-commitment

And YES

Yes to knowing when enough is enough

Yes to what is most important

and knowing what that is

Yes to taking care

to knowing what that is

Yes to living joyfully

and making that choice every day.

Yes to the song of myself

and to connection

to community

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 147-148.

and living its richness

Yes to this moment

just as it is.

Elizabeth Harper Neeld¹¹⁶

Sailing Out of the Harbor

Our third session occurred a few days later. I began by asking the co-researchers to share anything they had been reflecting upon in that space of time. Joy had been reflecting on the transition phenomenon. She had identified some key points. First of all, she had realized that each of the women present had found themselves in their transition through situations either completely or largely out of their control. I explained that I had intentionally chosen the people for the research and that this was a conscious decision on my part. I chose to invite women who had dealt with very difficult transitions. What she also perceived was that in each case there was “a spark that ignited something bigger.” With Clara it was a diagnosis and then a treatment plan; for Grace it was when she thought, “There has to be something better than this,” and said, “Yes, let’s do this;” Sophia received a positive diagnosis on things she’d been telling people all along; and she (Joy) received an email. At that moment “a line was drawn in the sand and there was no going back.” This was a good observation of the nature of transition. The spark that Joy was referring to was the change or event that occurred. The “no going back” part was the transition. Change is an event. Transition is a process.

As part of this conversation we discussed internal and external processes in transitions. Grace talked about the internal struggle she had about her husband’s desire to

¹¹⁶ Elizabeth Harper Neeld, *Tough Transitions: Navigating Your Way Through Difficult Times*, 253-254.

move to Canada in order to find work. Once she made the decision, the transition appeared to be more external. This was when she spoke aloud and by doing so put in motion an event that would change her life. On further discussion the co-researchers realized that the internal process continues throughout the transition. We are changed. Clara called it *transformative* and Bridges' definition concurs: "Transformation is the true destination of transition."¹¹⁷

Bridges speaks to the issue of internal and external changes. "The relation between change and transition is further complicated by the fact that some people actually utilize external changes to distract them from the harder business of letting go of their subjective realities and identities. They make changes *so they won't have to make transitions*." He goes on to say, "It is the inner realities that are hardest to let go of."¹¹⁸

When this *spark ignites* and a person finds herself in the land of *no turning back*, the only way to move forward is to let go of perceptions and assumptions. "Renewal is possible only by going into and through transition, and transition has at least as much to do with what we let go of as it has with whatever we end up gaining in its place." My way of explaining it to the co-researchers is to paraphrase the works of Bridges by saying that a transition begins with an ending and ends with a beginning.¹¹⁹

Many of the topics of transition that I have chosen to write about overlap. The topic for letting go is no exception. Letting go is tied in with the mid-life experience, finding a voice and boundaries, to name three. However it is an important topic that should not be ignored.

¹¹⁷ William Bridges, *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*, 126.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 17.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 201.

Sometimes the things we need to let go of are obvious, sometimes that's not the case. In order for the women to really inwardly reflect about the question of letting go, I shared with them a personal example. A few years after my divorce, I found myself in a very good place. My children were launched, I was living in a new townhouse that I liked, I was exercising and in better shape than I'd ever been, I was nearing the end of my Master's degree, and I was blessed with a supportive family and wonderful friends. Yet, I discovered that in order to really get past my divorce and enjoy this new reality, I had to accept the fact that I was most likely in a better situation than I would have been had my marriage survived. My divorce had been extremely bitter and any choice to leave or stay had been taken from me. I had to let go of my old assumptions about marriage in general, and mine specifically, and accept my new life as good, without apology or explanation. I had to admit that it was okay that my marriage had ended. The last thing holding me back was not a feeling, like anger, or a behavior, like selfishness. Rather it was letting go of an old assumption and an old life.

Transition does not require that you reject or deny the importance of your old life, just that you let go of it. Far from rejecting it, you are likely to do better with the ending if you honor the old life for all it did for you. It got you this far. It brought you everything you have. But now—although it may be some time before you are comfortable actually doing so—it is time for you to let go of it. Your old life is over. No matter how much you would like to continue it or rescue it or fix it, it's time to let it go.¹²⁰

Joy has had to focus on what she is moving toward rather than what she is moving from. She has realized that her identity has been tied up in her past position and she has needed to let go of that. Looking forward allows her to broaden her spectrum and open up new possibilities. Joy is learning to let go of feeling the shame of being fired. She said that she has not allowed her divorce to define her and that she is not going to allow this

¹²⁰ Ibid., 16.

experience to define her either, even though it will be part of her story. She has to let go of the hopes and dreams of something that couldn't be realized.

Grace said that with moving, there is an “actual physical letting go” with “millions of decisions to make,” regarding what you are going to keep, what you are going to give away, and what you are going to throw away. This was an interesting example. Our things define us to varying extents so I see this as having the potential to be a profound psychological exercise. Grace has also let go of the idea that she needs to be a passive participant in the move. She says the next move will be on her terms.

Sophia wishes that she had been able to seek medical treatment in the States for her husband. She would like to let go of the “if onlys.” Sophia is learning to let go of negative self-image. She has realized that she is strong, and she had never thought of herself in that way. Sophia has let go of some fears—fear of speaking up and fear of death. This has changed the way she lives her life. She has learned to speak up to her daughter, and set boundaries. She is no longer afraid to take risks and has been on several adventuresome trips since her husband has died. Sophia has always wanted to play the piano and has been taking lessons since her husband died. It has given her joy and contributed to her growing self-confidence.

Clara's cancer journey is a transition in and of itself. However it has been the impetus for her spiritual transition journey. She had to let go of worrying about how her parish family would view this exploration. She has been letting go of the need to please people and is learning to speak up in a way that is honest and respectful.

All of the women spoke about the need to let go of relationships that were unhealthy or “toxic”. They have realized that absorbing other people's negativity is a

hindrance to health and wellbeing. It can stand in the way of a person being productive in the ways they are meant to be.

Three of the women spoke of the need to be constantly volunteering. They still contribute to society in various ways, but are much more discriminating.

Summary

Each woman expressed what she had needed to let go of, or what she was currently working towards letting go. The text may appear brief but there was a lot of power in what they said. In a transition, a person doesn't necessarily have a list of things that need to be let go of. However, my research would suggest that if she is successful in doing this, her life can be transformed.

Forming the Team: People Along the Way

...as I belonged more and more to myself, I was able to relate more deeply and truly to those in my life. The relationships became something I chose, not something I felt dependent on or trapped in.

being one in myself wasn't an aloof containment but a spiritual and psychological autonomy. It meant being whole and complete in myself and relating to others out of that soul-centeredness.

Sue Monk Kidd¹²¹

The Village

The co-researchers were asked about the roles various people played in their transitional experiences. Some were positive experiences, some negative, but they were significant. How the women related to these people was also significant and evolved over

¹²¹ Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, 212.

time. As with faith, their transitions affected their relationships and their relationships affected their transitions.

As Howell found in her research, relationships are particularly important to women.¹²² This was evident with all four co-researchers. Not only were they aware of the roles of various people in their lives, they had a desire to understand these roles. What was also apparent was their desire to be relational with each other during the course of the conversations. They demonstrated this in the way they listened to each other and were willing to share in depth. They offered encouragement in the forms of affirmation, comfort, acknowledgment, humor, and solidarity.

In an age when developing as an individual is emphasized, it is possible to lose sight of the importance of our relationships:

In general, developmental theories have failed to describe the progression of individuals in relationships toward a maturity of interdependence. Yet human identity is inextricably bound up with one's relationship to others, and the notion of complete autonomy is a fiction. Human beings cannot exist in isolation, and the most important aspects of human experience are relational.¹²³

Family, For Better or Worse

The co-researchers were asked how families had impacted their transitions, both positively and negatively. What was interesting was that each woman answered in the context of parents and or siblings, rather than children and spouses, which is who I had in mind when I asked the question. However, as we continued the discussions, aspects of

¹²² Lynn Calhoun Howell "Issues and Insights: Implications of Personal Values in Women's Midlife Development." 61.

¹²³ Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, "Overview: The expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, And Social, Perspectives." *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives*, edited by Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, 9, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1999, 3rd Edition.

their immediate families as well as extended families continued to be part of the conversation. When we spoke about important issues such as learning to communicate, finding a voice and establishing boundaries, the topic of family would come up.

Clara came from a large family and was the only girl. Her brothers were very supportive of her in various ways, as were her sisters-in-law. They were able to demonstrate their support in practical ways such as providing meals and driving her for cancer treatments. She said that she “couldn’t think of receiving more support, even when maybe I didn’t think I needed it. [I was] used to being independent.” She said she found it extraordinary to have this kind of support and that it was really wonderful. In further discussions Clara spoke of her husband as being right beside her throughout her illness. One of her three sons was less than supportive. She shared this circumstance with us and there is more about Clara and her son later in this chapter.

As discussed in the chapter about Voice, Joy had a sense of living up to a reputation within her family. Therefore it was a process to be able to let go of feeling judged by them. She was used to thinking of herself as a strong person in her family. Her situation was different from Clara’s in that she had been terminated from her job which had provoked feelings of shame. She needed to deal with this and with how it affected her relationship with them. On more than one occasion Joy spoke of the wonderful relationship she has with her teenage daughter. At one point she called her a “beacon.” Another time she said, “My little rock is my daughter.” Joy wants to be “there for her and whole for her and not let her down. She has been really pivotal for me.” This inspires and motivates her through tough times.

Grace said that children can keep you on an even keel because you want to protect them from what is going on rather than dragging them into the situation, so that they can do what they need to do.

Sophia found that her brothers and sisters were supportive through her husband's illness and immediately afterwards. She related the story of one of her brothers making a surprise visit from Toronto to Calgary on the day of her husband's surgery. She had a brother help her with things like building a ramp for the wheelchair. After her husband's death they were supportive both practically and by being present. She has also received love and support from her husband's family. Prior to his diagnosis, Sophia's husband had been exhibiting behaviors that were, at times, emotionally cruel. Once he was diagnosed and both of them knew what they were dealing with, they were able to mend their relationship and they enjoyed their two final years together. Complicating Sophia's situation was her daughter's mental health. Her behavior fluctuated and could be very abusive. Sophia had to set limits with her, both to protect her husband and to maintain her own sanity. When her daughter moved out, it allowed Sophia to create a peaceful and loving environment for them. Although she described dealing with the effects of his illness as a horrendous experience in many ways, she is grateful for this time she had alone with her husband. The relationship with her daughter continues to be difficult. She said that this is her daughter whom she is supposed to love. She has come to the place where she can say that she loves her, but she doesn't like her, and she knows her daughter loves her "in her own sick way."

Grace's story of family has also been told in the chapter on Voice. She came from a family that was not good at expressing feelings. When it was announced that she was

moving to Canada, her family retreated emotionally. Her husband's family had been through the immigration process before and felt that it was "no big deal." Because she was going to a place where she knew no one, Grace felt very alone and unsupported. As a result of this experience, Grace has made a deliberate effort to be supportive of her two adult children.

Team Hurtful/Team Helpful

Clara spoke about "Team Hurtful" and "Team Helpful" and the importance of knowing which team people were on. When she used this terminology, everyone responded with enthusiastic affirmation. This was something to which everyone could relate. Joy spoke of having her "Go to People" and then went on to say that during challenging time in life one does not have time or energy for negativity, "We choose to dump a lot of toxic things *and* people. Negative energy is so draining."

It was helpful to Clara to be able to identify who was on each team. This was a good instinct. She said there were many people on Team Helpful, from Doctors, to people who went for walks with her, to most of her family. There were very few on the Team Hurtful list, but they could be very challenging. In fact, she had to come to terms with identifying one of her sons as being on "Team Hurtful." As a grade twelve student he was going through a difficult time of his own. He wasn't getting up and going to school and wasn't showing up for work. It was necessary for Clara to have an honest conversation with him about this and explain how unhelpful this was. Because she had named the circumstances (Team Hurtful), it simplified the conversation at a time when she was feeling tired and unwell.

At the individual interview when asked what was profoundly helpful to her during her transition, Joy said that it was her friends. Being a single parent would make the need for good friends even greater. She said that her friends were people with whom she could bounce things off and talk. On the other hand, Joy discovered that “many people seem to think termination is contagious.” She found out that people, particularly at work, whom she thought of as friends were, in actual fact, “false friends.” She contrasted these false friends to real ones who “listen and care with you authentically. [They] don’t say things that are trite.” Joy wanted to share with a few dear, trusted friends. She didn’t want to share with everyone. “[You] don’t want everyone to see you when you’ve had the crap kicked out of you.”

Sophia could relate to this. After her husband died, there were a few people who invited her over for “coffee and a good cry.” She didn’t want to do that. She wanted to be with positive people and look ahead. She also referred to the important role of a good friend she could call day or night, who was with her throughout her journey. “She listened to me before, when nobody would listen.”

Clara referred to “people who show up at crisis time but they’re not really there. [They] thrive on gossip and drama.” Then, she said there were the people who “appeared and stayed.”

For Sophia some of the doctors and nurses were difficult to deal with. She felt they were writing her husband off in a way that lacked empathy and consideration. She was not ready to accept that. Her way of dealing with this was to make decisions based on what she thought was best for him. She took him home and that is where he died.

Both Clara and Sophia spoke with gratitude about their church families. They appreciated their prayers, and their support. Clara spoke about hearing from people she had not been in contact with for a long time.

Grace knew it wasn't good to be isolated. She would go to malls to be around people. When her children were little she found a church program, "Ladies Take a Break" for herself and her children. Although she has made friends along the way, one of the things that has been difficult was knowing that she probably would not be staying in a place for more than two years. She made some good connections and then found herself having to saying goodbye. She has some regret now that she was very busy and did not always take the time.

Like Grace, Clara found a support group as well. It was through an organization that provides programs and information to people with cancer. She is still with this group and it is an important part of her life. She has also participated in programs offered by this organization.

Sophia was extremely grateful to an old friend of her husband. He spent a lot of time with him during his last days, and even took him out places, which had become very difficult because by now he was in a wheelchair and having seizures. Just getting him in and out of the car was complicated. Because the tumor had affected the communication portion of his brain, conversation could be a challenge but none of this mattered. At times he played music and at other times he just "hung out". Sophia's comment was, "Everybody should have a friend like that." These two had been friends since university and were very comfortable with each other. Not only was this nice for her husband, but it gave Sophia a break from the constant care that he required.

Since her difficult transition Sophia has learned to be more discriminating about her time. She said that rather than always saying, ‘‘‘Yes, yes, yes, yes,’ you can say, ‘Sorry, I can’t do that.’ I find I’m getting lots of things accomplished now.’’ She has made the choice not to ‘‘waste’’ her time with people who are willing to ‘‘dump’’ on her but are lacking in gratitude.

Summary

The co-researchers were all able to identify people who had been part of their transition. Some were supportive and helpful, even necessary. Others were challenging. One of the things they learned to do was identify these people. They have deep gratitude for the people who have been faithful companions. They have learned to protect themselves from the people who are unhelpful or a hindrance and those who bring with them negativity and toxicity.

I believe that in the end, it is up to us to make choices about the people we allow into the inner parts of our lives—and who we do not. The ability to make these choices allows us to exercise a level of power or control at times when that has been taken away from us in other areas of our lives. This is related to the concept of boundaries and voice.

Sophia, Clara and Joy referred to people they could talk to and share with in meaningful ways. They spoke about how important these people were to them. Grace was not always as fortunate and I believe this made her various moving transitions more difficult. Harper Neeld states:

Research shows that those people who talk to at least one other person about any and every thing they are feeling and thinking are healthier and more progressive in moving through the transition process than people who hold back and keep everything to themselves.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Elizabeth Harper Neeld, *Tough Transitions: Navigating Your Way through Difficult Times*, 80.

I am not saying that Grace purposely held back. She did not have the opportunity to form close friendships the way the other women, who have not moved, have. Nor was she able to share her feelings with family members as that was not their way of doing things. Grace has shown great inner strength and an ability to reflect and grow that is truly admirable.

These women articulated how they have learned the value of positive relationships with family and friends through their transitions. I know this informs their behavior post transitions, making them more compassionate, empathetic as well as realistic and wise.

Lighting the Way: Self Care

*O God,
as I look back at my life
I see many little pieces of light,
they have given me hope and comfort
in my bleak and weary times.*

*I thank you for the radiance
of a dark sky full of stars,
and for the faithful light of dawn
which follows every turn of darkness*

*I thank you for loved ones and strangers
whose inner beacons of light
have warmed and welcomed my pain.*

*I thank you for your Presence in my depths,
protecting, guiding, reassuring, loving.*

*I thank you for all those life-surprises
which sparked a bit of hope in my ashes.*

And, yes, I thank you for my darkness,

*(the unwanted companion I shun and avoid)
because this pushy intruder comes with truth
and reveals my hidden treasures to me.
Joyce Rupp¹²⁵*

Things Done

The co-researchers were resourceful women, each with their own unique strengths and talents. Harper Neeld refers to “signature strengths:”

Our signature strengths are not skills we have acquired or developed. They are strengths we possess innately. These signature strengths are integral to the unique way each of us approaches life. When we use them we are our most authentic. As we make decisions about what shape our life will have that will be congruent with the new circumstance we find ourselves in during a tough transition, it can be our signature strengths that provide us the means to a satisfactory end.¹²⁶

Clara showed herself to be extremely pragmatic. This proved to be a great strength for her when she received the diagnosis. It continued so as she dealt with test results and the necessary decisions regarding surgery and treatment. She said that anger is often a big part of cancer, and she remembers thinking, “Oh no..... okay” and was able to deal with the issues and never remembers thinking she was going to die. At one point a doctor said to her, “You know, Clara, you have a life-threatening illness.” Her response was, “Yes, but I’ll have my surgery and chemo and radiation, and life will go on.” It was only after that conversation that she “thought about it in that way.” Avoiding using the word “death” she said, “Those thoughts enter your mind.” One of the women in her cancer support group has had a recurrence and is in her “late days.” That’s been hard on the group and everyone’s thinking, “It’s not me.” She said that “you can’t stop those thoughts from entering your head, but you can choose what you do with those thoughts.”

¹²⁵ Joyce Rupp, *Little Pieces of Light... Darkness & Personal Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 65.

¹²⁶ Elizabeth Harper Neeld, *Tough Transitions: Navigating Your Way Through Difficult Times*, 205.

She acknowledges the thoughts but chooses not to keep them or “feed” them. Clara said that she has always been pragmatic, but through her life she has learned to be in touch with how she responds to certain challenges that come into her life. This includes, when she does have an emotional response, to ask herself, “where is this coming from?” and try to identify it. This self-reflective behavior works well for her. She said she does not know where this pragmatism and ability to step back and examine responses comes from. She said that it has always been in her and as she “progresses” it is coming out. In other words, it is innate.

Joy says that, although her present transition has been challenging, she tends to have the attitude of, “Okay—bring it! Let’s see what this is all about. I’ve been through worse.” I would suggest that this attitude has allowed her to move ahead with what she sees as important. Grace has worked with children with cancer. It has taught her to seize the “magical moments”. You never forget a birthday, anniversary, Christmas, and make them special. In my introduction I referred to words arising in our conversation like purpose. I would suggest that these attitudes contribute to a sense of purpose in their lives.

Sophia’s husband died in their bedroom. For a while she couldn’t go in there “and then I took control.” She replaced the furniture and painted one of the walls a bright teal. She has an African motif which reminds her of a happy time at the beginning of her marriage. She has created a sanctuary that she loves. Sophia is very creative and sews, quilts and makes crafts. She continued to do this while her husband was ill and after he died. She told a poignant story of being asked to create a banner. He got very involved in

the process and it became a joint effort in his last days. Sophia said that it was a wonderful experience and a wonderful way to spend time together.

Clara is an exceptional baker, having taken a college program. Sophia remembers visiting her when she was going through the cancer treatments. She arrived at the house to find her making biscotti. “There was this lovely lady at her mixer.” She said that when she hears about breast cancer now she always thinks of “Clara making biscotti.”

Clara spoke of walking her dog. She said that she could count on one hand the number of days she missed walking him. Sometimes it was a short walk, sometimes long, and sometimes her husband accompanied her, sometimes she went alone. But it was very important for her to go. She did not spend a lot of time in bed or sleeping and had the need for routine. She realizes now that it was a ritual. The women agreed how important rituals are. At the time of her treatment she was still going to church and that meant a lot. She also attended a yoga class. Joy spoke of the need to get into nature, to “smell, see, feel and be restored.” She feels grounded when in the outdoors. Sophia realized that making the quilt became a ritual.

A ritual for Grace is taking a bath with candles. It is a quiet, private moment when she can talk and pray. Joy concurred with this. Clara said that water and candles are a big thing for her as well – light and water. Grace has a beautiful statue of a woman and often when she takes a bath, she lights a candle beside it. The light sheds a shadow of the woman and she finds it grounds her. She can look at it, breathe out and say, “Okay.” In the chapter about faith I wrote about the story of Grace walking her dogs in the evening and experiencing moments with God. This was a ritual for her which she misses, now that she is no longer able to do this because of the wildlife in her rural area.

Joy does a daily affirmation in the morning. She occasionally gets away from it but always comes back. Several women spoke of reading as a way to be in touch with self and even shared titles of books.

The women also spoke of routines and self-care as being important. As Clara put it, “The day to day necessities of healing—chemo, get up, fresh air, eat right.

When Sophia was telling us about the quilted banner she and her husband worked on, she spoke of the colour yellow and, as the banner progressed, how it became more prominent. She found herself telling him, “Go towards the light.” The day he died one of her yellow hibiscus came into bloom, and through an “error” the bulletin for his funeral was infused with yellow. She saw these as signs. She continues to notice this colour and it reminds her of light, goodness and happiness. This led to a conversation about the importance of looking for signs.

Joy went through a great number of files and was able to find a lot of correspondence that acclaimed her good work. This has reminded her that she is capable and people do see that in her. It was a positive experience when she was struggling with negative thoughts about herself.

I noted that in listening to these women talk, I had picked up no bitterness and resentment in them. It pushed me to inquire what it was within them that they could draw upon. Grace said immediately that it was her faith. The others agreed. Grace said the transitions have increased her faith and spirituality and the trust to go within herself and make that connection.

Sophia said that when things are so out of control and out of the norm, you need to fall back on something that is solid. Even when things are totally overwhelming she can say that “God is in control – that’s alright, and just carry on.”

As related in a previous chapter, Joy said that one of the things that is solid for her is her daughter and her need to be there for her. She is also drawing on the attitude that she is not going to let this present situation get her down. Nothing has before. Like Joy, the other women were also able to draw on past experiences.

Things Left Undone

During the individual interviews I asked the co-researchers a question about what they had *not* received during their transitions.

Joy is still dealing with her transition. So far she has not been able to receive closure from her job ending, as details are tied up in legal issues. As well, she did not have a legitimate reason for dismissal given to her—“The truth has not set me free.” Although she has been able to draw on experiences of past transitions, this is a very different situation, uncharted territory.

Grace missed having somebody she could really talk to. She has realized that a key thing for her has been not always knowing the right questions to ask, and has missed having a person to help her with that.

Sophia felt unsupported by people one would expect to be there for you--doctors, counselors, the medical field in general, her daughter. She has had to deal with wondering how things might have been different if someone had listened.

Clara felt extremely supported in all aspects of her life. Seeing friends die has been a reality check and a reminder to her that life is a gift—every single day.

Summary

Each of the women had two inner strengths on which to draw, certainly connected. One connection was with God and one was in self. I heard it said in a sermon once that the more we know God the more we know ourselves, and the more we know ourselves, the more we know God.¹²⁷ The women's experiences concur with this.

From her research on women and faith, Slee makes a point which aligns with my experience in the research I conducted:

Despite the variety of relational metaphors, what was crucial for these women was the constancy and dependability of divine presence in their lives: a reality which was regarded as the source and ground of their own shifting identity and the guarantee of ultimate truth and meaning even when experience appeared constantly to contradict both. This conviction was expressed by a number of the women through metaphors of faith as the 'core', 'centre' or most abiding reality of their lives.¹²⁸

In their lives, there was attention given to, and strength that came from what Slee calls "the sacredness of the ordinary."¹²⁹ The routines of walks, eating well, and caring for children gave meaning to their lives and in and through these tasks they encountered themselves and God. They used the word *ritual* to describe some of them.

Using creative abilities was strength for Sophia and Clara. My experience is that using our creative talents, and enjoying the creative talents of others can have a spiritual aspect to it. It was a significant factor in my transition providing comfort, encouragement and healing. We were made in the image of God, the *Creator*. Therefore I believe our creativity is a connection to God and from God comes our strength.

¹²⁷ Greg Clark, sermon given in Cochrane, Alberta. Fall, 2012.

¹²⁸ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Process*, 141.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

We need to recognize and name those things from which we draw our strength, as well as what we need, in challenging times. This spoken knowledge will provide confidence to face our next challenges

Reaching Land: Defining Success

*But Jesus, who in this vision had informed me of all that I needed,
 Answered with these words, saying:
 “Sin is necessary, but all shall be well.
 All shall be well; and all manner of thing shall be well”
 Julian of Norwich¹³⁰*

A Successful Voyage?

We enjoyed some wonderful conversations. *I* enjoyed some wonderful conversations, but my time with my fellow co-researchers was nearly finished. There were three important questions yet to be asked, which I left until the end, during our one-on-one conversations. I have presented the direct answers they gave me during the final interview, and then I have added to their answers from the gathering of the wealth of information they generously shared.

When I was going through my difficult transition I would say, “I don’t want to survive—I want to succeed. The first of these questions was touched on during a group discussion when I asked them to define a successful transition. They did so in personal terms. I still thought it was important to ask whether or not each woman believed she had successfully negotiated her transition, and if she was still in the process, was she achieving success.

¹³⁰Julian of Norwich *Revelation of Love*. trans. John Skinner (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 54-55.

Joy is still negotiating her transition. Will she be successful? “Definitely. I know there will be a better place I’m going to. *This* will not define me. My north star is that *triumph* will define me.” Joy said that she understands peace and contentment—“it’s not metrics, it’s not about arriving”. She said, “I can look back and say I’m okay where I’m at. One of the things that gives Joy confidence is her experience with previous transitions. She knows she is resilient.

Grace believes she has been successful. The next move/transition will be on her terms. She will not be left behind this time. She will listen to her voice and will articulate her questions. Grace “take pride and joy in the success of my children.” It gives her a sense of accomplishment. I saw Grace move to this place of confidence as she was given a forum to tell her story.

Sophia said, “Yes”. She believes she is positive. When she hears people tell her she’s strong, she is starting to believe it. She said she is “stunned by how many people admire me, see me as positive, and want to hang out with me.” She is doing things she has never done before and is coming to terms with the fact that her life could only look this way if her husband died. She is helping people and hoping to honour him with what she does. She is not afraid of death or dying and has been able to help people who are “going home.”

Clara said, “Yes, definitely.” She said, “I like who I am, and finding my voice, being up front about who I am.” She has grown as a person and is more aware of who she is. She knows she can accept all that life can be. She is content with making choices regarding who she spends her time with. She misses some people, but knows that it is part of life’s journey. She is a “different person in a different place.” Clara was able to

say, “I’ve been successful,” but in her pragmatic way is also able to say, “Today is today. Our journey meanders.”

Advice for a Fellow Traveler

The next question I asked each woman was what she would offer someone going through a difficult transition.

Joy would offer “big shoulders.” She would like the person to know that she is not alone. She shared the words of a song that she has found comfort in:

God is too wise to be mistaken
 God is too good to be unkind
 So when you don’t understand
 When you don’t see His plan
 When you can’t trace His hand
 Trust His heart
 Trust His heart¹³¹

She has “faith and hope of something better than I can ask or imagine” and would want to share that.

Grace said that she would encourage them to think about what it is they have to let go, and if they are not sure, to find out what it is they need to let go.

Sophia said she would offer herself to say “anytime you want to talk, and anything I can do to help.” She would give them the book *Heaven Is For Real* by Todd Burpo.¹³²

Clara would tell her to be kind to herself and to love herself, acknowledging that may be easier to say than to do. She would also advise her to accept support from people

¹³¹ Retrieved from leadingsmart.com, January 31, 2013.

¹³² Todd Burpo, *Heaven is For Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

willing and able to offer it. It is important to get information and find support, but there is no “recipe”.

All four of these women have found purpose in their lives that moves them outside of themselves. Sophia has her sponsor children, Joy, as a single mother, is growing and launching a beautiful teenager, Grace is working with wounded families and Clara still has a son at home and is serving on the board of the cancer support organization. They have reasons to keep going.

Transition is a time of the unknown, an in between time. Old realities no longer make sense, and the future is unclear. When so much can seem beyond our control, it is empowering to find healthy ways to *take* control. Clara found that she could control the dissemination of information. Sophia had to ask her daughter to leave. Joy has taken a clear responsibility for her health and Grace has determined that she will have some say over the next move. These actions were empowering. Finding their voices, taking off their masks, and listening to the voice within have all impacted them in ways that have allowed them to take rightful control of situations.

Another aspect of their lives that I saw was empowering to all four of the co-researchers was the recognition that they were resilient. It was positive self-talk that convinced them that they had had difficult times before and got beyond them, and they would move ahead to something better again. All saw their transitions as creating positive transformations.

Preparing for Future Voyages

The third question was if there was anything about the transition she has gone through that would better equip her for the next.

Joy has learned that maintaining her health is job number one. The other thing she has learned is “You get through them—they’re surmountable.” What Grace has learned is the real value of the “faith piece.” She needs to be reminded of this—“a kick in the pants” is how she phrased it. Sophia has learned that “death is the ultimate transition” and that “puts everything in perspective.” She would now speak up for herself. What Clara has learned has been quoted previously, but it is worth repeating. “I know I’m resilient. Time heals all. I believe in impermanence. What I have now is great—what is down the road? Doors close; doors open. Not to worry.”

Summary

I was surprised at how straightforward and to the point the answers to these questions were. The first question seemed to be easy for them to answer. Ample opportunity had been given for discussion, reflection and sharing of ideas. Each co-researcher was thoughtful, really listened, and spoke honestly. Each woman was ready to answer this question. I chose them to be co-researchers because I believed that they had been or were being successful participants in their transitions. I was pleased that they thought so, too. This was an example of their high level of self-awareness.

When it came to the simplicity of the answers to the next two questions, I realized that this is what a person often needs during a difficult transition. They want things to be simple, not complicated. The women offered themselves and practical advice

and they were reassuring and encouraging. It was what they would have wanted for themselves.

CONCLUSION: AN ENDING AND A BEGINNING

*For surely I know the plans I have for you,
says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm
to give you a future with hope.
Jeremiah 29:11¹³³*

Looking Back on the Journey

As I write this my thesis is drawing to a close. I am striving to end well, so I can begin well. I have learned about transition and I have learned about myself. I have gained wisdom and confidence, thanks to researchers, courageous people willing to write their stories, and four co-researchers—Clara, Grace, Sophia and Joy. I am excited to share what I have learned with others. I want to connect with people, to journey with them a while, and encourage them as they negotiate the tough transitions of their lives. I will come to this with an appreciation for what I have learned from my own stories and deep gratitude for insights gained. We learn so much from stories, including our own. As a person who loves stories I can honestly say that my love affair has grown deeper.

There are many wonderful stories of transition—fiction, myth, true-life, and combinations of the three. They all contain truth, from Moses with the people in the wilderness to *The Wizard of Oz*¹³⁴ to William Bridges' story of personal transition. The results of this research emphasizes to me that we must not neglect the importance of listening to each other's stories. I have concluded that when we can listen with open minds and open hearts, when we can speak from a deep place of honesty, we can learn

¹³³ New Revised Standard Version

¹³⁴ The movie, produced in 1939 by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was based on a book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, published in 1900.

from each other. Finally the research has shown me that we need to tell our own stories, and *listen* to them. That may mean, as in Graces' case, writing them. It could mean finding safe places to tell our stories like the environment created by the co-researchers or, as Joy and Sophia mentioned, a trusted friend. We need to tell them to people who will listen and we need to listen to them as we tell them.

Narrative inquiry as a method of research has been a gift. I was able to take something I love—story--and use it as a valid part of the research. The co-researchers were so engrossed in the stories while they participated. When I was transcribing the initial conversations of the co-researchers introducing themselves by telling their stories, I was amazed how quiet the room was. Nobody so much as cleared her throat. The attentiveness was palpable, even listening to a recorded conversation. A sacred space was created in which everyone felt safe and able to share, sometimes in ways they had never before shared. Everyone entered into the process and as story after story unfolded and views were aired and considered, I learned more about transition, as did we all. We all learned more from each other and we are the richer for it.

Certainly there were times of emotion and tears as the stories unfolded. What was more surprising, though, was the level of composure in the room. These women got down to business, as it were, and, in a very level-headed manner, told their stories. I had assigned them a task, and they were prepared to cooperate in the best way they could. They came into the process knowing they would be listened to and they took this seriously, evidenced in the way they spoke with honesty and integrity.

I heard subtle changes to stories as time unfolded. It was all truth. New realizations and new realities bring new truth. Understanding truth in story is crucial,

including our own. In order to successfully negotiate a difficult transition there are things we need to let go of—the old reality. Sometimes what we need to let go of is an old story that no longer works:

On a day when we're beating up on ourselves, or feeling depressed, we could notice that we're telling ourselves a story. At that moment, we could deliberately choose another story, one that's positive, bragging, grateful. It won't be a true story, but none of them are. They're all fictions of our drama queen minds.

Changing the story seems unauthentic, lacking integrity. But in this case, authenticity is very over-rated. And extremely limiting.

Why, in this world of infinite freedom and choice, would we lock ourselves into one petty story, no matter how much time, attention and creativity we've spent on composing it?¹³⁵

I have observed that there can be such a thing as living a lie. People can delude themselves. These women had a high level of self-awareness. They had an ability to look inward with honesty. They knew they sometimes wore masks and they knew that sometimes it was a way of coping and other times an unhealthy behavior that kept them from reality, from *getting real*. Transition is a time for getting real. It is a time to look under the masks and see what and who is there.

I gained valuable insights from the co-researchers and spending time in their graceful presence was in itself encouraging and meaningful. Women who have developed an ability to be self-aware and who have taken that self-awareness into the ways in which they *live and move and have their being*¹³⁶ will reach mid-life with a wisdom and grace that begs to be shared. Because of this I will go forward from this research with a desire to engage women of wisdom and experience with young women in meaningful

¹³⁵ Margaret Wheatly, *Perseverance*, 103.

¹³⁶ Acts 17:28

conversations. I want to create safe places for story-telling and places where young women can be encouraged to grow into their full potential.

There is a desire within me to continue working with women in mid-life and beyond as well. There are some that have yet to learn to use the stories of their past to help them move ahead. It may be that they will discover old hurts, behaviors or assumptions that need letting go of. It may kindle awareness that they have been resilient in the past and that innate resiliency will get them through their present life challenge. They may need a place where stories of faith can be shared and explored. Finding their voice and learning to speak up could well be the catalyst. This process has increased my desire to walk alongside and help them see that they have within themselves what it takes to live a fulfilling life.

One of the qualities of transition is that so many things are unknown. The old way no longer exists and the new way has yet to be revealed. This can be daunting, depending on the severity of the situation.

Transition creates vulnerability. The safety of the old life has been set aside. The safety of the new life is not yet in place. The passage between the two feels perilous and threatening. Our feet move unsteadily on the rope bridge slung across the jungle chasm and yet, these feelings are illusions.¹³⁷

At a time like this, knowledge is power. Understanding the stages of transition can allow a person to know that what she is dealing with, and the feelings she has are “normal.” As the co-researchers told their stories they were motivated to understand them within the context of transition. In some cases they were able to make sense of specific situations. When Clara spoke of the transition she was now in, she used the word “timely” to describe her participation in such a discussion. I found it interesting that

¹³⁷ Julia Cameron, *Transitions: Prayers and Declarations for a Changing Life*, 41.

several times throughout our discussion, they would comment about the commonalities of their journeys. These four women were distinctly different, and I had purposely chosen women who had experienced different mid-life transitions. Yet they saw a common thread weaving through their stories. Joy said, at one point, that there was a “huge thread running through all our experiences. Well, a candlewick, actually.”

Resources Gathered for Future Journeys:

What Resources Have Middle Aged Women Drawn Upon to Negotiate a Difficult Transition?

Through reading and research I have gathered together resources that women may draw upon. My research group was very small and had a narrow demographic. What was shared in the group, aligned with what I read in the literature. Women have the potential to tap into the following resources.

People

When a devastating life event occurs, family and friends are certainly capable of being a tremendous support during the transitional time that follows. It is important to know who is on Team Helpful and Team Hurtful. Accepting the offers of genuine support and help can prove to be a lifeline. Naming people who are unsupportive by way of negative energy or wrong motives, and then controlling time spent with them is a necessary practice. Three of the co-researchers named various people as playing a crucial part in negotiating their transitions. Grace knew that her progress was hampered because she did not have people on whom she could rely.

When asked about ways in which they could be of practical help to others going through a difficult transition, they offered themselves as people who would listen, and could be called upon for help or support.

Skills and Talents

This research has demonstrated that using her creative gifts can provide a positive outlet. It is my belief that creativity can create order and beauty out of chaos and that this is a spiritual phenomenon. As in Clara baking or Sophia making a quilt, people can lose themselves in creating something aesthetically pleasing and have a satisfying end product. For me music was an important creative outlet. I listened to music and sang in choirs. Working with others to “create a joyful noise”¹³⁸ gave *me* joy.

While going through my divorce, I was enrolled in school. As in a creative pursuit, the work required my full attention, which took me away from other issues. I had a sense of accomplishment and confidence gained through the ongoing success of my work. I was able to transfer these attitudes to my general hope in the future. Joy spoke of re-reading reports of her considerable successes in her career which reminded her that she was a capable person. Grace broke a mold and went on to post-secondary education. This began a life’s love and she still pursues studies.

A natural curiosity leads to reading and learning about the subject with which they are dealing. Beyond that, books of all types can provide some escape and pleasure.

¹³⁸ Paraphrased from Psalm 100.

Mid-Life Wisdom

When going through difficult mid-life transitions the wisdom gained from past experiences can inform and encourage the passage through. Although for some, it would appear that life has beaten them up and created an attitude of defeat, the literature and the women with whom I explored would indicate that mid-life offers a time of self-reflection and a desire to make the most of the next part of life. Mid-life can be seen as a time of opportunity. By this stage we have learned that nothing is permanent and that life will continue on with highs and lows, good times and bad. This is a period in life when it is time to let go of things holding us back, like assumptions, negative self-images, various fears, and old hurts—and that is what a transition is all about.

Faith

For women of faith, a difficult transition can call their beliefs into question. Even when this happens faith is significant. It can, as in the case of Clara, and Joy to some extent, become a fascinating and important quest as they re-define and integrate a major part of their lives. For Sophia, God is always there. She may be angry with God, but God continues to be the rock in her life. Grace believes her faith has been a constant in a life of inconstancy.

Self-Care

In their discussion the women demonstrated that self-care goes beyond the bounds of following rules the rules of diet, exercise and general healthy lifestyle choices (such as getting enough sleep and not smoking or drinking to excess), important though these rules may be. True self-care can include esthetics. For example, Joy loves to be active in the outdoors. This is not only of great benefit for her physically and mentally, it also

feeds her soul. Clara has found both meaning and good exercise in a yoga practice. Walking the dog provided order and purpose to Clara's day and the fresh air and exercise were good for her. Sophia goes on long walks with her dog, who is a significant part of her life. Grace also spoke of taking her dogs out for walks and finding moments of spiritual awareness.

Joy speaks of taking care of her health through diet, exercise and finding answers to her medical issues. Taking care of herself is something done with intention, implying she is worthwhile.

I recall living on my own and enjoying cooking my dinner. I felt like I was caring for myself in a conscious way. I produced healthy, tasty food, just for me. Not only was this a good practice, it became a ritual. Sophia said that going to bed is a ritual for her. For Grace, it is baths.

Me, Myself and I

What has become apparent is that as mid-life women going through difficult transitions, one of the biggest resources we have to draw upon is ourselves. We can take responsibility for ourselves. There are our inherent "Signature Strengths" of which Harper Neeld speaks and upon which we can draw. There is our own voice that we can claim and use. There are constant personal choices to be made that can allow us to move ahead or stay stuck. Mid-life has given us the gift of insight earned from years of living and we have the choice to draw on that insight. We can choose an attitude of success and look for signs and symbols to encourage us along until we can once again, or maybe for the first time, dance in the light.

Further Research

*And ought not this woman,
a daughter of Abraham
 whom Satan bound for eighteen years,
 be set free from this bondage
 on the Sabbath day?
 Luke 13:16¹³⁹*

Before beginning this thesis, my goal was to be able to encourage women in attaining success in negotiating transitions in life. Transitions are difficult, and, as was pointed out in the body of this work, many people will go from situation to situation, avoiding the difficult work of transition. Although these situations are changes, they don't necessarily change us or, said another way, allow for personal growth. Rather than going to something—the new reality, we find ourselves running away. If our lives are left unexamined, we will find ourselves repeating unhealthy patterns, while, at the same time, not recognizing our strengths. We are not learning to distinguish between the two.

To accomplish the purpose of this study, it was necessary to read about and research with self-aware women who were able to successfully negotiate difficult transitions. However, what about women who get to mid-life and have not developed this ability? What about young women who, for whatever reason, have learned to silence their voices?

There were two important themes that arose from the research. One was the importance of finding and using your voice. This involves an internal process that then becomes effective in an external way. The other was the potential wisdom that mid-life affords. My next step is finding ways to communicate these themes to others.

¹³⁹ New Revised Standard Version

A young woman I know, who has been going through a time of great soul searching, shared the chorus of a song with me. Chris Tomalin wrote this chorus as part of the old song by John Newman, *Amazing Grace*:

My chains are gone
I've been set free
My God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy rains
Unending love, Amazing grace ¹⁴⁰

My question to her would be, from what are you being set free, and *for* what? How can I help her find her true voice, so she can truly understand what this means? How do I encourage this to come from her centre, rather than me spelling it out? When I say “her,” I mean young women generally. If I were to broaden the field, I would say to all women who have yet to discover their voice, their worth.

The parable I quoted from at the beginning of this section, is sometimes referred to as *The Parable of the Bent Over Woman*. When Jesus is chastised for healing her on the Sabbath, he reprimands the people that this woman is “a daughter of Abraham.” What he is saying is that she is worthy of dignity and respect. She deserves to stand up straight and look forward, not down. I want women to know that they deserve to stand up straight, that they are deserving of respect and dignity. I want to encourage—give them the courage—to straighten up, face their difficult transitions, and move through.

My next project will be to write a series of letters to these women. I will write them being mindful of young women, but I would like them to be for women who are, in some ways, stuck in an unhealthy pattern of youth. The co-researchers used the word *family* to describe their close associations. They spoke of parish families and Joy referred

¹⁴⁰ Chris Tomlin, *Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)*, website <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/christomlin/amazinggracemychainsaregone.html>, accessed March 16, 2013.

to her “sisters.” Our research revealed that we have wisdom to share. I am the mother of three daughters who are young women and two very young granddaughters. With these details in mind, I will entitle it, *Letters to My Daughter*.

There is further research to do in order to accomplish this next project. I want to further explore the themes that arose from this research. Particularly I want to continue to look at the notion of voice. Why do so many women have to *discover* their voices? What events have occurred to cause them to lose their voices in the first place? Why do many girls bury their voices intuitively? I will need to further examine developmental stages in a woman’s life. I want to be able to share an older woman’s wisdom with a young woman in a way that will encourage her to listen. How can I encourage her to bring out her innate strengths and wisdom?

As mentioned in this thesis, the co-researchers were reticent to speak of themselves as being courageous. This is something I want to investigate further as I believe it is an attitude worth claiming.

I am grateful to the process I have been through and am grateful that it is pointing me forward on my pilgrimage.

I have hope that this research will, in some way, give hope to others. Joyce Rupp speaks of hope. I will end, as I began, by quoting from her wisdom:

As I look back on my midlife journey, I realize I would never be who I am and where I am today if it had not been for hope. In the midst of my many inner struggles, I had hope:

...of greater inner freedom when I felt strangled by my fears and weaknesses.

...of finding the truth of myself when I groped around in the cave of my darkness.

...of accepting my mortality when I encountered my own aging.

...of living my unspoken dreams even when I experienced failure and self-doubt.

...of living a more balanced life in the midst of my crazy busyness.
...of being at home with God as I shook off old ways of naming and relating to God.
...of being faithful to my significant relationships while I searched for the meaning of commitment and fidelity.
...of sharing my personal talents and gifts in a loving, generative way as I allowed myself to see my ego-centricity.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹Joyce Rupp, *Dear Heart, Come Home: The Path of Midlife Spirituality*, 141-142.

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APPENDIX 1: LETTER OF INVITATION

Dear _____,

Presently I am working on my Master of Theological Studies at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton. The title of my Thesis is, "A Woman's Passage: Negotiating an Extraordinary Transition in Mid Life" and the question is "What resources have middle aged women drawn upon to negotiate a difficult transition?" As part of my thesis requirement I would like to do some research with women who have gone through a difficult transition in mid-life. This research would involve meeting with a small group of women (four or five) to share, as co-researchers with me, their stories and experiences. I would expect this group to meet two times, although that may be altered. I would also like to interview each woman individually. I would hope to use the results of the research in future publications as well as the thesis.

I would like to invite you to be part of this group of co-researchers. I am inviting you not only because of your experience, but also because I see you as an articulate woman whose shared experience would be valuable. I also see you as a woman who could be trusted with other people's stories.

If you agree to take part, I will fully outline what I am asking of you and what my responsibilities are in a "letter of informed consent" which we will both sign. At this point I think it is important for you to know that you would be anonymous and would be able to drop out of the project at any time, no questions asked.

I would like to do the research this fall (2112) and will set the dates when I know the availability of each participant.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please call (xxx-xxx-xxxx) or email me (xxxxxxxxxxxx).

APPENDIX 2: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project as a co-researcher.

This research is being done as part of my thesis requirement for my Master of Theological Studies at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton. The title of my thesis is "A Woman's Passage: Negotiating an Extraordinary Transition in Mid Life" and the question is "What resources have middle aged women drawn upon to negotiate a difficult transition?"

You are being asked to be part of a group of four or five women, plus myself. We will meet two times as a group for approximately two hours each time. If we feel there is more to be said, I will invite you to a third interview. I will facilitate conversation through which you will be able to discuss with the group the difficult transition you have gone through. It is my hope that through the sharing of stories and experiences, I will be able to learn what was helpful (and not helpful) to you during this time. I am interested in learning about all aspects of this journey, including the role that faith had to play. I plan to record these interviews. Once my thesis has been submitted and accepted, I will destroy the recording. If, for some reason, my thesis is not completed, the recording will be deleted in one year.

After the group process I will arrange to meet with you individually, for approximately an hour, changing that time allotment if agreeable to both of us. At that time I will give you an opportunity for you to share anything else you would like to say and will ask you some specific questions. At this interview I will take notes, but won't electronically record. These notes will also be destroyed upon completion of the thesis, or in one year.

When I have compiled the transcript of the various interviews, I will submit the transcript to you for your comment and input. I will not include anything to which you object. When the thesis is completed, I will also give you an opportunity to read it, if you wish.

If at any time you wish to drop out of this project, you are free to do so, with no penalty or questions asked. Any of your contributions to that point will be left out of the document.

Anonymity and confidentiality are very important. Each person will choose or be given a pseudonym which I will use in all reporting. If you agree to be part of this research you will agree to keep all you hear confidential as well. Every member of the group will be treated with respect by every member of the group. This will include allowing each co-researcher the opportunity to speak and be listened to without interruption, not tolerating pejorative or discriminatory language, and treating each story as sacred.

Sometimes the discussion of a difficult time in your life can bring back unpleasant memories and feelings. If this is an issue for you, I will have the name of a Chartered Psychologist and a Priest, either of whom will meet with you if you wish.

My research methods have gone before an ethics review board. However, if you have any concerns do not hesitate to contact my supervisor, Dr. Jean Waters by email (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx) or phone (xxx-xxx-xxxx). You may also direct concerns to St. Stephen's College (1-800-661-4956).

As well as for my thesis, I would like to be able to use the results of this research for future publications and presentations. I would use the information as approved by

you and anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained as in the thesis. By signing this you will agree to the use of the information in the future as outlined above.

AUTHORIZATION: I have read the above and understand the nature of this study. I understand the rights and responsibilities of participation.

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Sample Questions for the Group Sessions

- Please introduce yourself, using your pseudonym and telling us why you believe you have been asked to participate.
- After giving my definition of *transition*: Are there any comments anyone would like to make about this definition?
- What roles did the following have during your transition:
 - Family
 - Friends
 - Colleagues
 - Faith
 - Church Community
 - Participation in Activities, Individual and Group
 - Is there anything we have missed?
- (after a definition of *letting go*), What things did you need to let go of in order to move ahead?
- Where did you need to be patient with yourself?
- Where were you courageous?
- What have you learned about your self-image?
- I would say that having *successfully* negotiated a transition means that one can recognize that the event is part of who you are, but that it does not define you. Can you comment on this? How would you describe success

Questions for Individual Interview

1. When you were going through your difficult transition, what did you not receive that you think would have been helpful to you?
2. What was profoundly helpful to you?
3. Is there anything you would like to share with me that you have reflected on since the group time, or which you were not comfortable sharing with the group?
4. What have you learned about yourself through this process?
5. Has this been a helpful process for you?
6. Do you think you have successfully negotiated this transition? Why or why not?
7. What would you offer another person going through a difficult transition?
8. We go through transitions throughout our lives. Have you learned anything about the transition you have gone through that would better equip you for the next?